



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on January 18, 2012

TSA to Test X-Ray Machine Operators for Radiation Exposure

“After years of rebuffing health concerns over airport scanners, the Transportation Security Administration plans to conduct new tests on the potential radiation exposure from the machines at more than 100 airports nationwide,” [reports the Los Angeles Times](#).

The TSA did not publicly announce that it would be testing their operators for radiation exposure. Rather, reports that the agency planned to test its operators came out following a TSA request to provide its agents with wearable, personal dosimeters, which would measure radiation exposure. “TSA is dedicated to the health and safety of its employees,” TSA spokesman Nico Melendez asserted. “We continuously test our technology to ensure it is safe for both passengers and our officers and post all results to our website.”



Critics say that the TSA had been attempting to cover up the cancer cases. FOIA documents acquired by the Electronic Privacy Information Center revealed that when union representatives in Boston discovered the incidences of cancer among TSA workers there, the TSA attempted to downplay the issue and initially refused to give its employees the dosimeters.

Those same documents disclosed that indeed a “large number of workers have been falling victim to cancer, strokes and heart disease.”

The Electronic Privacy Information Center was forced to file a motion for summary judgment in its ongoing Freedom of Information lawsuit against the Department of Homeland Security to disclose documents with information related to radiation testing results, agency fact sheets on radiation risks, and images produced by the naked-body scanners.

On November 2, however, TSA Administrator John Pistole told a Senate Homeland Security Committee that the TSA will be conducting further independent research into the safety risks associated with the full-body scanners currently in use. He later backtracked, reporting that earlier independent studies have already proven the safety of the technology. “I am concerned that there’s a perception that they’re not as safe as they could be,” he commented.

There may be a good reason for that perception, however. A [report](#) filed by ProPublica on airport X-ray scanners reveals that they could cause “anywhere from six to 100 U.S. airline passengers each year [to] get cancer.” Additionally, a variety of experts have testified to the dangers of the technology, and the European Union has banned the scanners. As [noted](#) by *The New American's* Michael Tennant, “What’s



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worse, the TSA has other, safer types of scanners, known as millimeter-wave scanners, that the agency says are as effective as the backscatter scanners; but it has chosen to continue deploying the backscatter scanners even though they could adversely affect the health of the flying public."

While critics of the TSA and of the body scanners applaud the testing of machine operators for radiation exposure, they contend that the machines themselves should be tested as well to ensure that passengers are not being exposed to dangerous levels of radiation. "We still have no idea how much radiation is being imposed on travelers by a properly functioning machine," said James Babb, co-founder of We Won't Fly, a consumer advocacy group. "A malfunctioning machine could be particularly nasty."

A [PBS NewsHour story](#) on X-ray body scanners, reported in conjunction with ProPublica, aired on December 1. Entitled "U.S. Government Glossed Over Cancer Concerns," the report directed the public's attention to the safety hazards associated with the scanners. It revealed that the FDA rejected the advice of a 1998 expert panel, which voiced concerns about the widespread use of the scanners and recommended that the FDA set a mandatory federal safety standard for the machines.

In addition to that report, a number of other studies — conducted by such prestigious organizations as Johns Hopkins, Columbia University, the University of California, and the Inter-Agency Committee on Radiation Safety — have made similar determinations.

After his analysis of the machines, Dr. Michael Love, a biophysics expert at Johns Hopkins, warned, "Statistically someone is going to get skin cancer from these X-rays."

A large number of independent scientists have come forward as well to warn of the health threat related to the use of the scanners. John Sedat, a University of California professor of biochemistry and biophysics and a member of the National Academy of Sciences, sent a letter to White House science czar John Hodren, identifying specific risks posed to children and the elderly by the machines. He observed,

It appears that real independent safety data do not exist.... There has not been sufficient review of the intermediate and long-term effects of radiation exposure associated with airport scanners. There is good reason to believe that these scanners will increase the risk of cancer to children and other vulnerable populations.

What's worse is that documents obtained by the Electronic Privacy Information Center reveal that the TSA "publicly mischaracterized" the findings of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) by stating that NIST confirmed the safety of the full-body scanners. In fact, NIST warned that airport screeners should avoid standing next to the machines in order to keep harmful radiation "as low as reasonably achievable."

The European Commission has adopted recommended guidelines, prohibiting the use of the X-ray body scanners utilizing ionizing radiation. "In order not to risk jeopardizing citizens' health and safety, only security scanners which do not use X-ray technology are added to the list of authorized methods for passenger screening at EU airports," a [press release](#) reads.

While it's certainly true that the [hazards of radiation are often overblown](#), the fact that the government unconstitutionally makes travelers walk through unknown doses of potentially hazardous radiation is unconscionable.

Meanwhile, U.S. fliers may be exposed to the X-ray scanners even more this year. According to a new



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American Express survey, 2012 is expected to be a good one for the travel industry. More than eight in 10 Americans surveyed indicated that they will be traveling as much as or more than they did in 2011. Of those surveyed, 17 percent had already purchased tickets for their first trip of the year. In particular, younger professionals are expected to travel in large numbers this year. Of those surveyed, 57 percent of those under the age of 30 reported that they would spend more money on travel in 2012.

"The survey suggests good news for the travel industry," commented Claire Bennett, senior vice president and general manager of American Express Travel. "Consumers are planning to invest more in travel, and nearly a quarter are setting aside a separate travel budget to help them meet their 2012 travel goals."

At the same time, the Department of Homeland Security has announced that it will be expanding the use of the X-ray scanning machines, even though, as noted previously, its millimeter-wave machines could do the same job without releasing harmful radiation.



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