



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 14, 2011

TSA Records: Some Scanners Emit Ten Times Expected Radiation

Americans concerned about exposure to potentially dangerous levels of radiation from the Transportation Security Administration's full-body scanners just got another reason to worry: USA Today reports that on March 11 the TSA announced "that it would retest every full-body X-ray scanner that emits ionizing radiation — 247 machines at 38 airports — after maintenance records on some of the devices showed radiation levels 10 times higher than expected."



The TSA, of course, insists that all the machines are safe and that the records indicating the high radiation levels are the result of recordkeeping errors by technicians. TSA spokesman Nicholas Kimball told *USA Today* that, for example, "the testing procedure calls for the technician to take 10 separate scans" for radiation levels, "add them up and then divide by 10 to take an average. They didn't divide by 10." In addition, says the paper, "even the highest readings listed on some of the records — the numbers that the TSA says were mistakes — appear to be many times less than what the agency says a person absorbs through one day of natural background radiation."

The agency posted reports from 127 X-ray devices, including some used to scan checked luggage, on its website. "Of the reports posted, about a third showed some sort of error," Kimball told *USA Today*. Even more alarmingly, of the reports from 40 backscatter (i.e., full-body) scanners, 19 had errors, including six that were described as "considerable."

None of this might have come to light, however, if not for pressure from *USA Today* and members of Congress. On December 7 the newspaper [reported on scanner radiation concerns](#) of both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and TSA employees; it had already requested that the TSA release the inspection reports for all its X-ray scanners. Reps. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), John Dingell (D-Mich.), and Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) all [called for more openness from the TSA](#) regarding the safety of its scanners. Three days later the agency began reviewing its maintenance reports, whereupon it discovered the alleged errors. It is now in the process of releasing the results of its review for all 4,500 airport X-ray



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devices, including the 247 backscatter machines, all of which it is retesting as a result of its findings. It is also, according to the paper, requiring maintenance contractors to “retrain personnel involved in conducting and overseeing the radiation survey process.”

Chaffetz, now chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations, is skeptical of the TSA’s assertion that the divergent maintenance records are simple errors, telling *USA Today* that this “sounds like an excuse rather than the real facts,” adding, “I’m tired of excuses. The public has a right and deserves to know. It begs [sic] the question, ‘What are they still not sharing with us?’ These are things you cannot make mistakes with.”

Both Chaffetz and his upper-chamber counterpart, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, declared the TSA’s supposed errors “unacceptable.” Collins noted that despite TSA assurances that the scanners are safe, “[I]f TSA contractors reporting on the radiation levels have done such a poor job, how can airline passengers and crew have confidence in the data used by the TSA to reassure the public?” Chaffetz’s criticism was even more stinging, pointing out that the same agency that is “bumbling such critical tasks” as inspecting scanners for safety is also “supposed to be protecting us against terrorists” — hardly a reassuring thought.

Given this latest revelation, can Americans be sure that the TSA’s scanners really are as harmless as the agency would have them believe? [Some scientists](#) have already expressed the opinion that even the low level of radiation the TSA claims its scanners are emitting could be detrimental. But what if a scanner malfunctions and the TSA doesn’t realize it, as could very well be the case since its technicians don’t seem to recognize when test results are out of whack? In its December report on scanner radiation concerns, *USA Today* wrote:

Peter Rez, a physics professor at Arizona State University, also worries about the possibility of higher doses or even radiation burns if a machine malfunctions and the scanning beam stops on one part of the body. Rez, who has reviewed a patent application for the backscatter system, notes that the scanner has a fail-safe system that is supposed to shut down the X-ray beam if there’s a problem. “But we all learned this summer that fail-safe systems do fail,” Rez said, referring to the mechanical failures that resulted in the massive Gulf oil spill.

Rez told the paper on Friday that the contractor mistakes TSA identified only heighten his concerns. “I’m totally unconvinced they have thought ... through” what to do if a scanner starts emitting extremely high radiation levels, he said.

The TSA has done precious little to protect Americans from terrorism, and now they can’t even be sure that the agency is protecting them from its own scanners. Meanwhile, it violates the Constitution and basic human decency innumerable times daily by showing airline passengers’ naked bodies to its employees and requiring those employees to grope the most intimate parts of some of those passengers’ anatomy.

The TSA’s announcement of its “mistakes” may, however, have salutary effects. It is likely to bolster the growing [state resistance](#) to the agency’s gross violations of air travelers’ dignity. This, in turn, may lead to calls for Congress to restrict or even abolish what Professor Rez described as this “large, bumbling bureaucracy.”

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