

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

September 17, 2002

The Honorable Tom Ridge
Director
Office of Homeland Security
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Norman Y. Mineta
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
400 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Mr. Ridge and Mr. Mineta:

We are writing to express concern that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has been, and continues to be, severely deficient in screening luggage for explosives at our nation's airports. According to recent data provided to the Government Reform Committee by the Inspector General of the Department of Transportation, TSA is using none of its existing explosive detection machines at maximum capacity levels. In fact, TSA is using less than 3% of these machines at minimum capacity levels.

As a result, according to the data from the Inspector General, explosive detection machines are now sitting idle while millions of checked bags are loaded onto airplanes without being screened for explosives.

In testimony before the Government Reform Committee during the August recess, Alexis Stefani, the Assistant Inspector General, explained that the type of explosive detection machine currently deployed at airports across the country — the CTX-5000 — is certified by the Federal Aviation Administration to screen up to 250 bags per hour. Ideally, machines operating at maximum capacity could screen as many as 4,500 bags per day, given that many airports have 18 hour days. At a minimum rate, IG officials say that explosive detection machines should be able to screen 125 bags per hour for 10 hours per day. For this reason, Ms. Stefani testified that explosive detection machines “should be screening, at a minimum, 1,250 bags per day.”¹

¹Testimony of Alexis M. Stefani, Assistant Inspector General for Auditing, U.S. Department of Transportation, House Committee on Government Reform, *Hearings on Airport Baggage Screening: Meeting Goals and Ensuring Safety; Are We On Target?* (Aug. 7, 2002).

According to the data provided to the Committee, however, no explosive detection machines are running at full capacity, and very few are even meeting minimum requirements. The IG provided data on 155 machines for June 2002.² Of these, none screened 4,500 bags per day, and only four screened an average of more than 1,250 bags per day. In other words, based on the IG data, TSA is using less than 2.6% of its existing explosive detection machines at minimum capacity levels.

In addition, according to the IG data, only nine machines (5.8%) are averaging over 1,000 bags per day. The majority of machines (52.9%) are screening fewer than 500 bags per day, less than half of the minimum capacity. There are even 33 machines (21.3%) that screen fewer than 250 bags per day, compared to the machine's capacity to check up to 250 bags per hour.

If the 155 explosive detection machines were used at full capacity (250 bags per hour for 18 hours per day), the machines ideally could screen 697,500 bags per day. Even at minimum capacity (125 bags per hour for 10 hours per day), the machines should be able to check at least 193,750 bags per day. According to the IG data, however, these machines are screening only 79,000 bags per day. Running at minimum capacity, these machines could screen over 800,000 more pieces of luggage over the course of a week than are currently being screened. At maximum capacity, these machines could screen over 4.3 million additional bags per week.

This problem appears directly attributable to refusals by TSA to change its policy. The IG's office has recommended repeatedly that "TSA needs to direct that the current rate of machine usage pick-up substantially."³ Currently, bags are chosen for screening by a computer program that generates a list of passengers with security concerns. This program, the Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System (CAPPS), identifies passengers who purchase tickets with cash, travel one-way, or have other identifiers that may highlight security concerns. The system also selects a set number of random passengers for screening.

The IG believes the primary cause of underutilization is that airlines are not required by TSA to screen bags in addition to those chosen by the computer system. After processing luggage on the prescreening list, the machines simply sit idle rather than continuing to screen additional luggage. Although the IG has recommended that TSA "increase the CAPPS random

²The IG reports that there are 218 explosive detection machines currently deployed at airports across the country. The IG's office was provided with data on 155 of these machines.

³Testimony of Alexis Stefani, *supra* note 1.

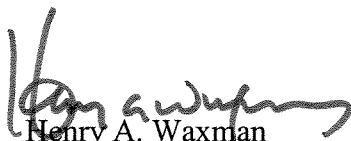
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selection factor to increase bulk explosives detection machine utilization rates,”⁴ TSA has not adopted this recommendation.

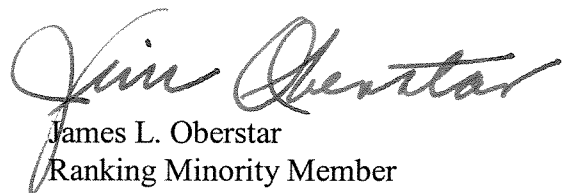
This new data from the IG has important legislative implications. At the same time that explosive detection machines are woefully underutilized at airports around the nation, the Bush Administration is requesting that Congress delay the December 31, 2002, deadline for TSA to ensure the screening of all checked luggage. In fact, at the Administration’s request, House Republicans included a one-year extension of this deadline in the homeland security bill that passed the House on July 26, 2002. The contention that this long delay is necessary, however, is seriously weakened by the fact that so much existing equipment is standing idle.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of September 11, this problem must be fixed. The security of the public is needlessly jeopardized by allowing over 4.3 million bags to go unscreened each week.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform



James L. Oberstar
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure

cc: Admiral James M. Loy

⁴Memorandum from Alexis M. Stefani, Assistant Inspector General for Auditing, U.S. Department of Transportation, to Michael A. Canavan, FAA Associate Administrator for Civil Aviation Security, *Status of FAA Actions on Recommendations in the Audit of Deployment of Advanced Security Technologies* (Aug. 24, 2001).