



No 'silver bullet' for improving air security

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By Alan Levin, USA TODAY

Machines that check carry-on bags for explosives and devices that look for bombs under people's clothing have already been produced, but it is likely to be years before a method of detecting liquid explosives is in widespread use at U.S. airports, according to manufacturers and government leaders.

The new devices could add security to a U.S. aviation system that is vulnerable to explosives and to bombs brought aboard planes as separate chemical components. Such weaknesses were allegedly targeted by terrorists in a plot British authorities said they stopped last week. The plot reportedly sought to blow up jets over the Atlantic Ocean.

Scientists and academics are developing ways to identify liquid explosives, including a swab that could detect hydrogen peroxide, a key ingredient in the explosive that terrorists allegedly planned to use in the planes plot. But shortfalls in research funding and bureaucratic in-fighting have slowed development of new systems, said Tony Fainberg, a retired manager of the Department of Homeland Security's explosive detection research.

Fainberg said some new devices could have been tested sooner if the department had not diverted funding for its testing lab. In 2003, \$61 million out of the \$110 million Congress gave Homeland Security for research was diverted to pay for things such as new airport screeners, according to the Government Accountability Office.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff cautioned that no one technology is a "silver bullet."

"The difficulty is not detecting such chemicals at screening checkpoints," Chertoff wrote in a column published today on USA TODAY's Forum page. "It's that existing detection processes either yield substantial false positives or require items to be screened one at a time."

Chertoff said that placing these devices in airports could create massive security backups

Among the devices:

- Baggage-screening machines that use CT-scan technology may be approved soon for carry-on luggage. Large CT machines now examine all checked bags. Homeland Security is testing devices that are small enough to fit at airport screener checkpoints.
- A technology known as quadrupole resonance could also be placed in machines that are about the size of current checkpoint X-ray machines. Quadrupole resonance uses technology similar to magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, to identify different types of explosives.
- Technology known as backscatter X-ray is being developed for use on bags and people. Unlike traditional X-ray systems, the backscatter devices can see skin through people's clothes or hidden liquid items in luggage.

These devices have come under harsh criticism from civil liberties groups that fear they will compromise people's privacy.

The Transportation Security Administration has also tested devices that can detect liquid explosives or use radio waves to find bombs.

Bomb-sniffing dogs could also be used. Dogs can be trained to smell bomb components that screening devices might miss, said Jeff Cottle, a canine trainer with Explosive Countermeasures International.

TSA Administrator Kip Hawley said that he believes CT scan and quadrupole resonance machines are very promising, but he is hesitant to rely solely on technology.

He said he thinks it is just as important to better train TSA's airport screeners to spot explosives. Another program that he is pushing has created special teams of screeners trained to spot suspicious behavior among passengers.

"It is all about the layers (of security) and not about the sales brochure for some new technology," Hawley said.