

**GAO**

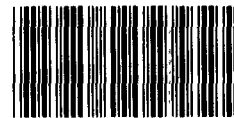
**Testimony**

For Release  
on Delivery  
Expected at  
10:00 a.m. EDT  
Thursday  
October 22, 1987

**FAA's Implementation of a Performance  
Standard for Passenger Screening Process**

Statement of  
Kenneth M. Mead, Associate Director  
Resources, Community, and Economic  
Development Division

Before the  
Subcommittee on Government Activities  
and Transportation  
House of Representatives



134217

040323

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We appreciate the opportunity to testify again on the preboard passenger screening process--a critical component of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Civil Aviation Security Program. The purpose of passenger screening at U. S. airports is to prevent firearms, explosives, and other dangerous weapons from being carried on board an airplane and presenting a danger to the traveling public.

In our June 18, 1987, testimony, we concluded that FAA should establish a preboard passenger screening performance standard. Today's testimony responds to the Subcommittee's request that we report on FAA's progress to develop and implement this standard and that we provide an update on FAA's screening test results. We also will discuss FAA's response to passenger screening recommendations made by the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Safety Review Task Force.

Our observations are based on an analysis of over 6,000 FAA passenger screening tests, discussions with FAA program officials, and a review of FAA documentation. While we did not validate FAA's test results collected from field offices, we did verify the accuracy of FAA headquarters' input of these results to the agency's computerized data base.

Overall, we believe that FAA's aviation security program serves as a deterrent to criminal acts against civil aviation and promotes the safety of the traveling public. To improve this program, we recommended that FAA establish a passenger screening

performance standard, and we deferred to FAA's expertise as to what, specifically, this standard should be.<sup>1</sup> Effective October 1, 1987, FAA established a 100 percent standard which requires that screening systems detect all FAA test weapons.

To implement this standard, FAA developed an enforcement policy. Under this policy, FAA is to take administrative action and assess civil penalties when air carrier screening systems fail to detect test weapons. FAA previously could not take enforcement action for failed tests because it had no published performance standard. FAA hopes that this policy will achieve timely corrective actions to improve passenger screening performance. We believe this policy is a positive first step. Because the standard became effective just 3 weeks ago, further evaluation will be needed to determine how well screening operations are performing under the standard and whether the enforcement policy is working effectively.

As for screening performance over a 10-month period ending June 30, 1987, we found that the nationwide detection rate of FAA test weapons is about 80 percent. These test results do not significantly differ from the initial 4-month period test results presented in our prior testimony and, in fact, confirm our earlier finding that shortfalls exist in the passenger screening program.

To address these shortfalls, the DOT Safety Review Task Force also recommended in a July 1987 report several measures to improve

---

<sup>1</sup>Aviation Security: FAA Needs Preboard Passenger Screening Performance Standards (GAO/RCED-87-182, July 1987).

passenger screening. These measures included testing screening equipment to determine effectiveness and establishing qualification and training standards for screeners. In general, FAA concurred with the recommendations and as of October 7, 1987, was in the early stages of acting on them.

PASSENGER SCREENING PERFORMANCE  
STANDARD ESTABLISHED AT 100 PERCENT

As a result of FAA's recent actions to implement a performance standard, the Air Carrier Standard Security Program was changed to establish a performance standard for measuring the effectiveness of the passenger screening process. FAA set this standard at 100 percent. This means that air carriers, acting through their employees, contractors, and agents who perform screening functions, must detect each FAA test weapon during each screening system test conducted by FAA. With this published standard, FAA can now take enforcement actions, ranging from warning letters to fines up to the legislated maximum of \$1,000, when air carriers' screening checkpoints fail to detect test weapons.

FAA will use its testing program to decide whether screening performance meets the standard. Under this program, FAA inspectors test each of the three components of the screening process--X-ray, metal detector, and physical search--by trying to pass test weapons through the screening checkpoint. This testing program allows FAA to apply the standard, develop a data base on checkpoint performance, and take enforcement action, according to an established enforcement policy, when the test weapons are not detected.

In our earlier testimony, we pointed out some problems concerning the realism of FAA-conducted passenger screening tests. FAA has taken action on this matter as well. Effective October 1, 1987, FAA guidance now calls for more realistic packing of baggage containing test weapons and is encouraging inspectors to rely on other FAA personnel to conduct the tests, thus guarding against easy inspector recognition.

#### FAA'S ENFORCEMENT POLICY

FAA's policy for enforcing the new detection standard requires that the agency take enforcement action each time a screener fails to detect an FAA test weapon, i.e., each attempt by FAA to pass a weapon through the system is considered a test. This policy is two-fold, depending on the circumstances surrounding the test situation. When a test failure occurs without "aggravating" circumstances, such as lack of screener training, FAA can proceed first with an administrative action, such as a warning letter notifying the air carrier that a test failure has occurred and corrective action must be taken. When "aggravating" circumstances exist, however, the policy provides that FAA should proceed directly to its most severe sanction--a fine.

FAA's policy states that to ensure uniform treatment of each air carrier, FAA will consider the results of its tests in groups of five. For the first two failures out of five, administrative actions will be taken. At the third failure, a fine of \$1,000 will be assessed.

The policy also requires FAA to bypass administrative action and immediately assess civil penalties when "aggravating" circumstances exist during testing. Examples of these circumstances include, but are not limited to, lack of screener training, inadequate supervision of screener undergoing on-the-job training, and inattention to duty on the part of screener. In these circumstances, a civil penalty is to be taken immediately; that is, a fine will be assessed as a result of any such test failure. The amount of the recommended civil penalty would be determined by the seriousness of the "aggravating" circumstances; however, the amount cannot exceed the statutory maximum of \$1,000.

ENFORCEMENT POLICY IS POSITIVE FIRST STEP:  
FURTHER EVALUATION NEEDED

The enforcement policy FAA has developed to improve air carriers' passenger screening performance is a positive first step to bringing about timely corrective actions. In our June testimony, we emphasized that screening performance has not been acceptable for several years and that many previously identified personnel-related problems still exist. We stated that, based on FAA test results, wide variations in the frequency with which test weapons were detected exist at the nation's major airports. We also pointed out that the program's effectiveness is hindered by high turnover, low wages, and inadequate training. On the basis of our work, it is clear that in many instances air carriers have not placed sufficient emphasis on security to ensure that passenger screening checkpoints operate at the highest level of performance.

We believe that the absence of a performance standard and lack of enforcement authority for dealing with substandard screening performance contributed significantly to these longstanding screening problems. Now that FAA has a performance standard as well as an enforcement policy, the agency can impose its strongest sanctions--fines--when a screening station consistently fails to detect test weapons. Since under this program civil penalties or fines are intended to quickly bring about corrective action, we believe that FAA's current enforcement policy can serve as one of several management tools in effectively overseeing this program.

It is important to note, however, that further evaluation by FAA will be needed to assess the effectiveness of this policy in improving passenger screening performance. We believe that this evaluation should be conducted after a sufficient implementation period--perhaps after about 6 months. This evaluation should address not only the effectiveness of the policy in light of available data on detection rates, but also whether the current \$1,000 civil penalty limit is adequate.

SCREENING TEST RESULTS  
FOR 10-MONTH PERIOD

During the June 18th hearing, we testified that based on FAA tests, conducted from September through December 1986, there were wide variations in the frequency with which test weapons were detected at preboard passenger screening checkpoints. Using the results of 2,419 tests, we found that screening personnel correctly identified the test weapons in 1,923 of these tests, or about 80 percent of the time. In the remaining 496 tests, FAA inspectors

were able to pass the test items through the screening checkpoints undetected. The detection rates varied significantly at 28 major airports<sup>2</sup>, ranging from a low of 34 percent at one airport to 99 percent at another.

FAA responded to our findings by testifying that the agency would continue its testing and analysis because it believed the test results for the September through December period were too limited to support a valid conclusion. At this Subcommittee's request, we analyzed FAA's updated test results which now include about 6,000 tests conducted over a 10-month period ending June 30, 1987.<sup>3</sup> We found that nationwide the overall detection rate (for both the updated 6-month testing period and the cumulative 10-month period) was about 80 percent and that wide variations existed among individual airports.

For 34 major airports, the detection rate ranged from 99 to 48 percent, with 7 of the major airports falling below 70 percent. Of the 34 airports, 17 had detection rates of better than 80 percent. The test results for these 34 airports are presented in appendix I.

Overall, these data confirm our findings concerning program deficiencies noted in our prior testimony. Since the standard was only recently implemented, however, we believe FAA should continue

---

<sup>2</sup>A major airport is one that generally screens over 2 million persons annually.

<sup>3</sup>As of October 7, 1987, the results of the tests represented the most recent data available.



to gather and analyze test results to determine the impact of the standard and enforcement policy on system performance.

FAA RESPONSE TO DOT TASK  
FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

In July 1987, DOT's Safety Review Task Force also recommended a series of actions to improve the passenger screening process. These recommendations included (1) testing screening equipment to determine effectiveness, (2) establishing qualification and training standards for screeners, and (3) consolidating multiple enforcement actions into single cases for individual air carriers. In general, FAA concurred with the recommendations and as of October 7, 1987, was in the initial stages of implementing them.

FAA's actions to date include initial testing of x-ray and metal detector units at selected major airports to determine the adequacy of this equipment. Concerning the "human factor" recommendations to set employment qualifications and training standards for screeners, FAA has contracted out a study on the impact of various factors on the efficiency of preboard screening. The initial concentration of the study is on the incentive awards program and the adequacy of the pay scale for screeners.

In addition to these actions, FAA plans to convene in December 1987 a task force to determine the feasibility of implementing the DOT recommendation that FAA consolidate passenger screening enforcement actions against a single carrier from all regions into a single case in the region where the carrier's headquarters is located. FAA officials believe that this consolidation could

further emphasize the need for improved performance on the part of air carriers' screening operations.

- - - - -

In summary, we commend FAA's actions to develop a passenger screening performance standard for the detection of test weapons. This standard clearly defines for air carriers the level of performance expected by FAA. FAA's enforcement policy is an important first step to bringing about timely corrective actions on the part of air carriers. The ability to impose enforcement action provides FAA with a management tool needed for effective program oversight. We believe, however, that after the standard has been in place for at least 6 months, FAA should evaluate the policy's effectiveness relative to improving screening performance. This evaluation should take into account cumulative detection rates, the adequacy of civil penalty limits, and FAA's progress in implementing the DOT Task Force recommendations.

This concludes my testimony, Madam Chairwoman. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

**RANKING OF FAA SCREENING TEST RESULTS  
FOR 34 MAJOR AIRPORTS**

<u>Airport<sup>a</sup></u>	<u>Detection rate (percent)</u>
1	99
2	93
3	92
4	91
5	91
6	90
7	87
8	87
9	87
10	86
11	86
12	85
13	84
14	83
15	83
16	81
17	81
18	78
19	76
20	75
21	74
22	73
23	73
24	73
25	72
26	72
27	70
28	67
29	66
30	63
31	62
32	58
33	55
34	48

<sup>a</sup>The airports ranked above are all major airports--generally, over 2 million persons screened annually. Test results shown cover a 10-month period ending June 30, 1987. At these major airports during this 10-month period, FAA conducted 30 or more screening tests.