

Help Protect Airline Passenger Privacy

Dear Colleague:

I urge you to join me in protecting the privacy of airline passengers by cosponsoring Senate Amendment 51 to the FAA Air Transportation Modernization and Safety Improvement Act.

In 2010, the Transportation Security Administration greatly expanded the use of Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) machines at airport checkpoints around the United States. These systems capture an image of what lies underneath an individual's clothing and can detect both metallic items and non-metallic substances such as powders, liquids, and gels that can be used in explosive devices.

While the machines may be able to detect more than a standard metal detector, they also raise significant privacy concerns. The image produced by an AIT machine is highly revealing and many passengers are uncomfortable being screened by the technology. Unfortunately, TSA's policy for passengers who refuse AIT screening is to conduct a full pat-down – hardly an ideal alternative for someone with privacy concerns.

There is a promising option to address the ongoing privacy concerns with AIT. New software, called Automatic Target Recognition, can be installed on existing AIT machines to enhance privacy by eliminating passenger-specific images and instead detecting potential threat items and indicating their location on a generic outline of a person. This month, TSA will begin testing the new software at Las Vegas McCarran International Airport, Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta International, and Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

The new software will automatically detect potential threat items and indicate their location on a generic outline of a person that will appear on a monitor attached to the AIT unit. As with the current version of AIT, the areas identified as containing potential threats will require additional screening. The generic outline will be identical for all passengers. By eliminating the passenger-specific image associated with the current version of AIT, a separate TSA officer will no longer be required to view the image in a remotely-located viewing room. Through removing this step of the process, AIT screening will become more efficient, expanding the throughput capability of the technology.

STATE OFFICES:

Senate Amendment 51 would require TSA to have Automatic Target Recognition software installed on all AIT machines by January 1, 2012. This will provide ample time for TSA to thoroughly field test the software and work with the manufacturers to make necessary adjustments. However, by imposing a deadline, it will ensure that TSA and the manufacturers make the implementation of the software a priority and will eliminate the potential for unnecessary delay.

While TSA's role is crucial in protecting the safety of air travelers, we must also ensure that they are doing everything possible to properly balance security with the privacy rights of passengers. Below are images produced by AIT machines using the current software and the new Automatic Target Recognition software. I hope you'll agree that implementation of the new software should not be delayed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tom Udall". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The word "Tom" is written in a larger, more prominent script, and "Udall" follows in a similar but slightly smaller script. The ink is a vibrant blue color.

Tom Udall
United States Senator