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Experts chide TSA for poor risk assessment of security measures

By [Aliya Sternstein](#) 09/30/11

This story has been updated.

Control over passenger screening technology should be shifted to airlines because the private sector is better than the Transportation Security Administration at making economical security choices based on risk management analyses, officials from a libertarian think tank said during a Capitol Hill briefing Friday.

Jim Harper, the Cato Institute's director of information policy, said he wished he had an opinion about the risk management study that TSA has conducted on body scanners, but "TSA does not do risk management studies or cost benefit studies -- or is not doing anything that it publishes."

On Sept. 22, a Government Accountability Office auditor **testified** that the agency does not routinely consider costs and benefits when acquiring new technologies. "In October 2009, we reported that TSA had not yet completed a cost-benefit analysis to prioritize and fund its technology investments for screening passengers at airport checkpoints," Steve Lord, GAO director for homeland security and justice issues told a House Homeland Security subcommittee.

"Done well, cost-benefit analysis will guide government efforts, as well as it will guide private efforts at security," Harper said during the briefing titled Abolish the Transportation Security Administration. "Cost-benefit analysis is basically about trade-offs . . . [In the security arena], that's hard because you're trading dollars for security."

This summer, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit effectively **ordered** TSA to examine such tradeoffs in response to a lawsuit filed by the nonprofit Electronic Privacy Information Center.

According to the ruling, TSA must issue a public notice justifying its body scanning rules and allow for comment. "That essentially means that the TSA has to put its thinking on the record," Harper said. "That means essentially going through the risk management steps."

On Friday, he also questioned a government project that is developing sensors to detect physical cues indicative of malicious intent, or the desire to cause harm. "We're talking about shining lasers and using cameras that will detect people's biorhythms, bioactivities to determine whether they plan on doing something bad," Harper said of the Future Attribute Screening Technology project.

"There is no science behind this -- no good science," he added.

Prior to the brouhaha over body scanners, the agency took heat for wasting about \$30 million dollars on "puffer machines" that would blow air on people to check the particles emitted for residue from bomb-making or other dangerous substances. TSA "couldn't get people through the puffer machines . . . they broke down regularly" and millions of dollars were wasted that could have been saved had the agency spent a little money on risk management, Harper said.

He expects the transitioning of technical operations to airlines could happen in a year if Congress passes a law to strip TSA of authority over that jurisdiction. "We're talking about doing much of the same security, but doing it better," Harper said.

Seth Stodder, former policy and planning director for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, objected to granting companies responsibility for selecting screening technologies at a time when Al Qaeda members, including those trained by recently assassinated Anwar al-Aulaqi, are still targeting commercial airlines.

"That's essentially back to the future or back to the pre-9/11 world," he said. "The basic point is, after 9/11 we needed to have a TSA, because the airlines were not doing a good job, so we needed to have a federal presence to secure mass forms of transportation . . . There has to be a federal standard for what types of machines are used."

While the agency may have made some bad choices along the way, it still is a relatively young agency and is trying to fix past errors, said Stodder, now a senior fellow at The George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute. He pointed to [common sense measures](#) TSA Administrator John Pistole is taking at intake lines, such as letting frequent fliers keep on their shoes.

"The administrator I think is recognizing the need for TSA to be smarter about how it manages risks and processes people through screening check points in terms of moving away from the screening-every-grandmother approach," he said.

TSA officials were unavailable for comment.