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House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure DEMOCRATS

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Air Travel Security Improving Senior T&I Democrats say more screeners, advanced technology still needed

WASHINGTON—Senior Democrats on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee today said security at the nation's airports could be significantly improved if Congress and the Bush Administration provided the funds needed for adequate numbers of screeners and advanced screening technology.

Responding to a report released today by the Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General, Rep. James L. Oberstar, Rep. Jerry F. Costello, and Rep. Peter A. DeFazio said the federalized airport screening force nonetheless has made air travel more secure.

"TSA's main mission is security. But the agency also has the responsibility to move passengers efficiently, so long as security is not compromised. In both of these missions, TSA has been handicapped by the ill-advised cap of 45,000 full time screeners imposed by the House Appropriations Committee over two years ago -- a cap imposed without any basis for determining that 45,000 was the right number," said Oberstar, Ranking Democrat on the Committee. "The cap is both arbitrary and counterintuitive. We have cut passenger and baggage screeners at the same time we are anticipating growth in passenger traffic."

"In addition, I have long urged the TSA to certify and deploy next generation passenger explosive detection equipment such as inline explosive detection systems (EDS), walk-through trace portals, document scanners, shoe scanners, and backscatter x-ray scanners," Oberstar said.

"While I am disappointed that progress has not been made, clearly the traveling public is safer today than before September 11th," said Costello, Ranking Democrat on the Aviation

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Subcommittee. "The recent General Accountability Office findings and those of the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General demonstrate the need for the Bush Administration to provide adequate funds so that we can equip our screeners with proper technology to do their job. Until the Administration follows through with this commitment and its commitment to protect the traveling public, there will continue to be weaknesses in the system."

"Despite TSA's stagnant bureaucracy, poor management and inability to deploy advanced technologies, screeners have done the best they can with the ancient machines they are forced to work with. It's time we give screeners 21st Century tools to combat 21st Century threats," said DeFazio, a senior member of the House Aviation Subcommittee and the House Committee on Homeland Security.

"However, I don't believe that we should return to the bad-old-days of private screening. Waiving liability and cost for private screening companies is sure to provide a windfall for those private companies, but doesn't guarantee increased security. Further, I don't believe that the TSA has regulatory authority to force airports to move to private screeners, and I can't imagine this Congress would vote to return aviation security matters over to the companies that failed us on 9/11."

TSA reports that its screeners intercepted more than 3,338,000 prohibited items at security checkpoints between October 2004 and March 2005, including knives, explosives, fireworks, and other dangerous objects.

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