

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-261](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

As part of its responsibilities for securing civil aviation, TSA ensures that all passengers and their accessible property are screened and prohibits individuals from carrying onto aircraft items that it determines to be a threat. TSA maintains a public list of such items, known as the Prohibited Items List, and updates it as necessary. In March 2013, TSA announced it would modify the PIL to allow small knives and certain sporting equipment onto aircraft, stating the change would result in more efficient security screening. However, several aviation industry groups opposed the decision, leading TSA to reverse its decision to implement the change. GAO was asked to review TSA's procedures for modifying the PIL.

This report examines, among other issues, (1) on what basis TSA modifies the PIL and the extent to which TSA assessed risk when considering recent modifications to the PIL, and (2) the extent to which TSA involved stakeholders when considering these modifications. GAO reviewed TSA's standard operating procedures, risk assessment, documentation of its decisions and stakeholder outreach, and interviewed TSA officials at six airports. This is a public version of a report with Sensitive Security Information that GAO issued in December 2014. Information TSA deemed sensitive has been redacted.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA establish a formal process for soliciting input from relevant external stakeholders on proposed modifications to the PIL before making changes to it. DHS agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-15-261](#). For more information, contact Jennifer A. Grover at (202) 512-7141 or [groverj@gao.gov](mailto:groverj@gao.gov).

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## AVIATION SECURITY

### TSA Should Take Additional Action to Obtain Stakeholder Input when Modifying the Prohibited Items List

## What GAO Found

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials stated that TSA considers four factors when determining whether to make modifications to the Prohibited Items List (PIL), but the agency did not fully assess risk when considering its recent proposed PIL modifications, as GAO has previously recommended. TSA generally considers the following four factors when determining whether to modify the PIL: (1) the security risks posed by each carry-on item, (2) opportunities to improve screening operations and passenger experience, (3) harmonization with international security standards and practices, and (4) stakeholder perspectives. While TSA considered these four factors when making its March 5, 2013, decision to allow small knives and certain sporting equipment on aircraft, TSA officials also reasoned that the proposed change could help screening personnel focus less on lower-threat items, such as small knives, and more on higher-threat items, such as explosives, thereby potentially increasing security for passengers. However, TSA did not conduct sufficient analysis to show that the increased risk of allowing small knives on aircraft—as determined in its risk assessment—would be offset by a resulting reduction in risk from improved screening for explosives. GAO has previously recommended that TSA strengthen its evaluation methods for operationally testing proposed modifications to checkpoint screening procedures, including changes to the PIL. However, TSA has not consistently implemented this recommendation. Conducting additional risk analysis would have allowed TSA to actually measure whether airport screeners would be better able to identify explosives if they no longer had to screen for small knives. GAO continues to believe that TSA should develop and apply sound evaluation methods when considering modifications to the PIL, as GAO recommended in April 2007.

TSA did not effectively solicit feedback on its 2013 PIL decision from relevant external stakeholders, some of whom subsequently expressed strong opposition to the decision to remove small knives from the PIL. For example, prior to announcing its decision, TSA did not coordinate with or obtain input from the Aviation Security Advisory Committee, which is TSA's primary external advisory group for aviation security matters and whose membership includes various airline industry associations. Some relevant stakeholders, such as flight attendant groups—from whom TSA did not adequately solicit feedback—subsequently expressed strong opposition to the proposal, which contributed to TSA reversing its decision to implement the change after having already trained screening personnel for its implementation. Having a defined process and associated procedures in place to communicate with relevant stakeholders earlier in the decision-making process could allow TSA to ensure appropriate consideration of their perspectives in the decision-making process. Use of a defined process and associated procedures could also allow TSA to better avoid rescission of any future changes after investing resources in training screening personnel and informing the general public of the change—as happened in the case of TSA's 2013 PIL decision.