

Airports: Hands as Smooth as... a Bomb?

Innocuous products can trigger bomb detectors

March 31 issue — Departing Hawaii, Connie St. John was startled when airport security pulled her aside after swabbing her bags with an explosives trace detector. A 45-minute search turned up no bombs, but St. John had applied something to her hands that triggered the ETD: hand lotion. “They said this happens on occasion,” says St. John, 57.

The Transportation Security Administration concedes that innocuous products can trigger false positives: under certain circumstances, their molecular speed can match that of explosive residues. The TSA hasn’t issued any bulletins to travelers because “we don’t think this is a big enough issue to alert the public,” says a spokeswoman. **But John Fannin, CEO of the safety-accreditation company SafePlace, says, “The public should know these trace detectors have a potential for false alarm.”** ETDs were rushed into the field when airport security was taken over by the federal government Jan. 1; mass screenings were supposed to be done by high-tech CAT scanners. Gary Van Berkel, of Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, says: “They’re being used because they’re cheaper.”

—*Paul Tolme*