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Bomb detector gets green light

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THE annoyance of having to take off shoes at airport security checkpoints is set to become a thing of the past thanks to technology developed in Perth.

Perth-based company QR Sciences has signed an agreement with US technology giant General Electric to supply scanning technology for a new machine capable of scanning shoes.

Travellers stand on a platform and GE's ShoeScanner uses the Perth technology, which is similar to a medical MRI, to detect explosives in 5 to 8 seconds.

QR Sciences gets a royalty every time the technology is used and stands to reap millions from its use.

The technology uses radio waves to penetrate objects and get a response from the atoms in substances such as plastic explosives. It is more sensitive and versatile than traditional detection techniques.

"It's low frequency radio waves — AM radio basically — so it's very safe," said QR Sciences vice-president of commercial applications Gary Pennefather.

"You come up and you stand on a little platform — it's got a couple of shoes marked on the floor — for a couple of seconds and then you keep walking through. And while you're standing on it it's putting radio waves through the soles of your shoes and listening for the response."

The US Transportation Security Administration is assessing the machine as a way of speeding up queues at 2000 American airport checkpoints. The first machines could be installed by the end of this year.

People fumbling with footwear at checkpoints is a major logjam in the US, where passengers have been regularly required to remove shoes since the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Security agencies increased the scrutiny of shoes after terrorist Richard Reid that year tried to blow up a Paris-to-Miami flight using explosive hidden in his sneakers.

Initial plans are to use the ShoeScanner for the US Registered Traveler program due to get under way this month. Under that program, travellers who pass a background check and pay an annual fee will be able to get through security faster.

But Mr Pennefather said the TSA had indicated it was interested in a wider roll-out of the device and it could be introduced in Australia.