

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Chairman



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Moving Beyond the First Five Years: Ensuring Successful Implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative”

April 16, 2008 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism Subcommittee hearing entitled “Moving Beyond the First Five Years: Ensuring Successful Implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative”:

“Like many of my colleagues, I strongly support the goals of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), which was mandated by Congress in response to a recommendation of the 9/11 Commission.

Secure documents are essential to secure borders.

However, I continue to be concerned about the manner in which WHTI has been implemented to date. As Americans rushed to get passports to comply with the new WHTI rules for air travel last year, demand overwhelmed the State Department’s capacity to issue passports.

This demand created an unprecedented passport backlog.

I have traveled to our northern and southern borders and understand the potential consequences for tourism and commerce when Americans are required to have documents that our government fails to make available in a timely manner. As we move toward implementation of WHTI at our land borders in June 2009, it is imperative that the Administration take these lessons learned and apply them to the next phase of WHTI implementation.

With that in mind, I commend the Departments of Homeland Security and State for publishing the rule for the new land requirements well in advance of the effective date, so that border community residents, businesses, and other stakeholders have notice of the new requirements.

Simply publishing the new rules is not enough, however.

The Departments of Homeland Security and State must ensure that Americans have ready access to WHTI-compliant documents, including passports, PASS cards, and enhanced drivers’ licenses. The Departments must also conduct a robust education and outreach effort so that Americans know and understand the new rules.

It is worth noting that the WHTI land requirements are scheduled to take effect under the next Administration. In order for WHTI to be successful, the current Administration must lay the

groundwork for smooth implementation of the land rules in June 2009.

This will be the first change of Administration for DHS, and the Committee intends to keep a close eye on the progress of WHTI and other Department programs. It is my hope that today's hearing will help ensure that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative is implemented, and implemented right."

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