

Press Release

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MAJORITY OF VWP COUNTRIES TO MEET DIGITAL PHOTO DEADLINE

25 of 27 Visa Waiver Program Countries fully comply with October 26th passport requirement

WASHINGTON, DC – The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced today the majority of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries will meet the requirement to produce passports with digital photographs by October 26, 2005. Based on a Congressional mandate, the requirement for digital photographs is part of a multi-layered approach to increasing the security of our citizens and visitors by helping to ensure the integrity of their travel documents.

Twenty-five of the 27 VWP countries have achieved full compliance with the October 26, 2005 requirements. Most of the VWP countries have done so by producing passports with digital photos integrated into the data page of the passport.

Austria will issue passports to self-identified travelers to the United States with a visa “foil” integrated in a visa page of the passport. This visa foil alternative is an acceptable alternative means of compliance with the digital photo requirement, and DHS certified earlier today that Austria is now compliant with the October 26 requirement.

Italy and France will have limited digital photo production capabilities in operation by October 26, 2005 to replace all passports that will expire with passports that include digital photos. Therefore, travelers from these countries are urged to contact their local passport issuance offices to obtain information on whether a digital passport can be issued. If not, DHS urges travelers to obtain a visa prior to travel to the United States

DHS will continue to work closely with these countries to certify their full compliance as soon as possible.

Beginning October 26, 2005, transportation carriers will be fined up to \$3,300, per violation, for transporting any visitor traveling under the Visa Waiver Program to the United States who does not meet these requirements. Similarly, visitors traveling under the Visa Waiver Program arriving in the United States on that date without the proper passport should not anticipate being granted entry into the country.

The 9/11 Commission placed great emphasis on secure travel documents as several of the 9/11 hijackers used fraudulent travel documents to enter the United States. The Commission concluded that “for terrorists, travel documents are as important as weapons.”

To target fraudulent document use, the U.S. Congress mandated in the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 that any passport issued after October 26, 2005, and used for VWP travel to the United States, must include a biometric identifier.

Responding to the congressional mandates and the 9/11 Commission, DHS and the Department of State have worked closely with the Visa Waiver Program countries to deprive potential terrorists of a tool they use to threaten our country and other countries around the world: the ability to cross our borders using false documents and violate our immigration laws without detection.

One major step forward is the October 26, 2005 deadline requiring VWP countries to begin using biometrics in passports by producing passports with digital photographs. Digital photographs provide more security against counterfeiting than traditional photographs. Digital photos can be electronically stored and accessed, therefore making it easier to verify whether the individual currently presenting the passport is the same person to whom the passport was issued.

While a digital photo is an important step in requiring biometrics in passports, this is just the first in several steps to incorporate biometric identifiers into travel documents. To further advance our security measures, DHS has established policy requiring all VWP countries to produce passports with an integrated circuit chip, known as “*e-passports*”, capable of storing biographic information from the data page of a passport, a digitized photograph and other biometric information no later than October 26, 2006.

The 27 countries participating in the VWP include: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Visitors with valid machine-readable passports issued prior to October 26, 2005, may continue to travel without a visa under the Visa Waiver Program. Passports issued on or after October 26, 2005, require the digital photo. Visitors who are issued a passport after the October 26 deadline that does not meet these requirements will be required to obtain a visa to travel to the United States.

Visitors can tell whether their passport meets these requirements if it contains a digital photograph that is printed on the page, not glued or laminated into the document. Digital photographs offer more security against counterfeiting than traditional photographs. Passport guidelines and samples showing what to look for to determine if a passport is in compliance can be viewed on the DHS website at www.dhs.gov/interweb/assetlibrary/VWP_PassportRequirementTimeline_07-2005.pdf.

Instructions to apply for a U.S. visa are available at www.travel.state.gov, by calling the Department of State's Visa Services center at (202) 663-1225, or by contacting the nearest consulate or embassy.

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