



Homeland
Security

News Release

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DEPARTMENTS OF HOMELAND SECURITY AND STATE REQUEST EXTENSION FOR BIOMETRIC PASSPORT REQUIREMENT

VISA WAIVER PROGRAM TRAVELERS TO BE ENROLLED IN US-VISIT

WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 2, 2004 – The Department of Homeland Security and Department of State today announced that the Administration has asked Congress to pass legislation that would extend for two years, the October 26, 2004 deadline for Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries to have machine readable passports which include biometric identifiers, and also for DHS to have readers for these biometric passports at all ports of entry. In the context of this request, Homeland Security announced that it will begin processing visitors traveling under the VWP in US-VISIT beginning by September 30, 2004, at air and sea ports of entry.

“In our ongoing collaboration between the Departments of State and Homeland Security, we are making two complementary decisions,” said Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary of Border and Transportation Security of the Department of Homeland Security. “Since most countries are unable to meet the original October 2004 date to include biometrics in passports due to several technology-related reasons we have asked Congress for a two year extension of that requirement. Also, by September 30, visitors traveling under the Visa Waiver Program who arrive at airports and seaports will be enrolled in US-VISIT.”

An estimated 13 million visitors from Visa Waiver Countries enter the U.S. each year. Travelers from Visa Waiver Countries are allowed to enter the U.S. for up to 90 days for business or pleasure using only a passport.

Homeland Security has coordinated with the Department of State on both of these issues. “We are encouraged by the progress that has been made by VWP countries to introduce biometrics into their passport program and we will work with them to meet the mandated deadlines. Since its inception on January 5, 2004, it’s clear that US-VISIT is working. It’s clean, it’s quick, it’s simple and without question, it is enhancing the integrity of our immigration systems, while protecting individual privacy,” Under Secretary Hutchinson said.

The following 27 countries are currently in the VWP: Andorra, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. (For citizens with the unrestricted right of permanent abode in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man)

Since its launch in January, the US-VISIT program has helped DHS and DOS officials intercept more than 200 persons with prior or suspected criminal or immigration violations. These included convicted rapists, drug traffickers, individuals convicted of credit card fraud, a convicted armed robber and numerous immigration violators and individuals attempting visa fraud.

Experience has shown that the US-VISIT enrollment process is fast and easy for travelers and works as an added layer of security. Since deploying US-VISIT entry capabilities at 115 airports and 14 seaports on January 5, 2004, more than 2.5 million foreign nationals have been processed without adversely impacting wait times.

Currently, US-VISIT requires that most foreign visitors traveling to the U.S. on a visa and arriving at an air or sea port have their two index fingers scanned and a digital photograph taken to verify their identity at the port of entry. By September 30, 2004, this process will also apply to visitors traveling under the VWP at all air and seaports of entry.

The U.S. is not alone in using biometrics to enhance identity verification and security. The worldwide use of biometric technologies is the basis of an extensive array of highly secure identification and personal verification solutions.

Expanding enrollment of foreign nationals traveling under the VWP builds on the Department's progress to secure our ports of entry without harming our economic security.

For more information, visit www.dhs.gov/us-visit.

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