

*Comments Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)
On DHS Announcement Of Draft Plan For New WHTI
Border-Crossing Requirements
Wednesday, June 20, 2007*

[Today (Wednesday), the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and State announced draft plans for moving forward with implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). Their action comes as momentum is building in both the Senate and the House to move the next WHTI implementation date forward 17 months. Beginning Jan 31, 2008, DHS plans to begin initial elements of WHTI implementation at land and sea ports of entry by ending the routine practice of accepting oral declarations alone. At that point, U.S. and Canadian citizens will need to present either a WHTI-compliant document or a government-issued photo ID, such as a driver's license, plus proof of citizenship, such as a birth certificate. The Secretary of Homeland Security, in consultation with the Secretary of State, will then set a date to implement the full requirements of the land and sea phase of WHTI. DHS and State expect the date of full WHTI implementation to be during the summer of 2008. Leahy is the chief sponsor of the Leahy-Stevens Amendment to delay implementation, passed last week by the Senate Appropriations Committee, during markup of the annual DHS funding bill. The House passed a similar amendment a day later. Leahy's comments on the draft plan follow:]

“WHTI in the hands of DHS is like a skydiver who jumps first and tries to pack his parachute on the way down. Today's huge passport backlogs, prompted by the launch of DHS's requirement for air travel passports, are just a taste of the chaos that's likely next summer when they want to start enforcing passport checks at our land and sea borders, which account for ten times the volume for air travel.

“Month after month and hearing after hearing, DHS and State have high-handedly rushed to impose this new border-crossing plan on the American people before they are ready with the necessary technology, infrastructure and training, and at every step their rosy assurances have been wrong. Their record on this is clear, and it has been abysmal. These hollow demands to ‘just trust us’ don't cut it anymore from the agency that defined competence down after Katrina.

“There is another train wreck on the horizon if they continue pushing forward with full implementation of WHTI before the necessary policies and procedures are in place to handle the surge in applications, to resolve potential complications in producing a new and untested passport card, and to prepare for the lengthy border delays that are in the offing.

“Frustrated Americans by the thousands have been calling congressional offices for emergency help during the current passport backlog mess, and we have been doing what we can – passport by passport. The State Department and DHS vastly underestimated the passport demand for WHTI's air component – which is a small percentage of all cross-border traffic – and I remain concerned that their continued public insistence of full implementation of the land and sea travel provisions in January 2008 is unrealistic and unachievable on that timetable. Let us not set the American people up yet again for failure and frustration.

“Since DHS keeps saying that the WHTI is a ‘congressionally mandated’ program, they should stop opposing the bicameral and bipartisan legislation now moving through Congress to shift the new passport requirement to June 2009. They have been warned repeatedly, yet even the fresh embarrassment of this passport debacle hasn't knocked sense into them. Unfortunately, this impracticable timetable announcement today shows that DHS and State are not committed to making fundamental reforms to the program before they unleash it on the public. By maintaining the fiction

that they will be ready to implement the largest phase of this program next January, they are recklessly risking the travel plans of millions of Americans and the economies of scores of states and communities.”