

Press Release

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Secretary Michael Chertoff

DHS TO REQUIRE DIGITAL PHOTOS IN PASSPORTS FOR VISA WAIVER TRAVELERS

Visa Waiver countries also required to use “e-passports” in 2006

WASHINGTON, DC – Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff announced today that Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries will be required to produce passports with digital photographs by October 26, 2005. On that date, all VWP countries must also present an acceptable plan to begin issuing integrated circuit chips, or e-passports, within one year.

This announcement relates to the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 requirement that any passport issued after October 26, 2005, and used for Visa Waiver Program (VWP) travel to the United States, must include a biometric identifier based on applicable standards established by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

“The electronic passport is the path to secure and streamlined travel among Visa Waiver Program countries,” said Secretary Chertoff. “These passport requirements will maintain and strengthen the integrity of the Visa Waiver Program in a manner consistent with congressional intent and international standards. We are pleased by the progress of many Visa Waiver countries in complying with these requirements and we look forward to working with all participating countries toward their speedy and complete adoption.”

After extensive consultation with Congress and the Department of State, DHS is requiring by October 26, 2005, a digital photograph of the passport holder’s face printed on the data page of the passport. DHS will impose an October 26, 2006 deadline for the integrated circuit chip, or e-passport, capable of storing the biographic information from the data page, a digitized photograph, and other biometric information in travel documents. Valid passports issued before October 26, 2005, will still be accepted for travel under the auspices of the VWP, provided that the passports are machine-readable.

In order to facilitate compliance with e-passport requirements, DHS will create a validation process for VWP countries to test their e-passport prior to issuance. An upcoming technical conference with VWP countries and the United States government will clarify the details of this validation process, which will require that all e-passports be submitted by September 1, 2006 in order to be validated by October 26, 2006.

In addition to the digital photo and chip requirements, DHS is taking steps to strengthen document integrity by requiring VWP countries to commit to several measures concerning lost and stolen passports. Among them, DHS will require VWP countries to report all lost and stolen passports to INTERPOL and DHS, report all intercepted lost and stolen passports and increase information sharing between VWP countries and the United States government on trends and analysis of lost and stolen passports.

In another step toward the implementation of the e-passport, DHS and the Department of State are conducting a “live test” with the governments of Australia and New Zealand.

The “live test” begins today at Los Angeles International Airport and at the Sydney Airport in Australia, and will continue throughout the summer. Airline crew and officials from United Airlines, Air New Zealand and Qantas Airlines have volunteered to use the e-passport when arriving at either airport. Their participation will enable DHS to further test operations, equipment and software needed to read and verify the information contained in an e-passport.

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.

As previously announced, effective June 26, 2005, any traveler from these 27 countries is also required to be in possession of a machine-readable passport to enter the United States. Last year, approximately 15 million VWP travelers visited the United States.

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