

Extension of Requirement for Biometric Passport Issuance by Visa Waiver Program Countries.

Press Statement
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President Bush yesterday signed H.R. 4417 to extend by one year, the requirement for Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries to include biometrics in passports. H.R. 4417 was passed by the House of Representatives on June 14, 2004, and by the Senate on July 22, 2004.

The requirement for Visa Waiver travelers to have biometrics included in passports was mandated in the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002. The passage of H.R. 4417 and the signing by the President extends for one year, to October 26, 2005, the deadline by which new passports issued must be biometrically enabled. This extension was necessary to avoid potential disruption of international travel and provide the international community adequate time to develop viable programs for producing a more secure, biometrically enabled passport. The original legislation required that Visa Waiver Program country passports issued on or after October 26, 2004 be biometrically enabled for use in Visa Waiver travel.

To mitigate security concerns related to this extension, the Department of Homeland Security will begin enrolling Visa Waiver Program travelers through the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program at all airports and seaports on or about September 30, 2004. Enrollment in US-VISIT allows the United States to continue international efforts to enhance border security while facilitating legitimate travel. The US-VISIT system is a fast and easy process that requires two digital index finger scans and a digital photograph from a traveler to verify his or her identity.

Another requirement for Visa Waiver Program travel will still come into effect on October 26, 2004. On and after that date, all passports used for travel in the Visa Waiver Program must be machine-readable. Last year, the Secretary of State granted a postponement from October 1, 2003, until October 26, 2004, as the date by which Visa Waiver Program travelers from 22 countries must present a machine-readable passport to be admitted to the United States without a visa. Four eligible countries did not request a postponement of the effective date. Belgium was not eligible to request a waiver.

Although the addition of biometrics to the U.S. passport is not covered by the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act, the Department of State has been working diligently towards developing U.S. biometric passports. The United States recognizes the benefits of biometric identity verification and strives to remain at the forefront of international travel document security. By the end of 2005, all domestically produced U.S. passports will be biometric passports.

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