

## ***WSTPC 2009 ISSUE PAPER: INT'L TRAVEL FACILITATION***

**BACKGROUND:** The tourism industry has been concerned over the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), which would require all travelers, including U.S. citizens, to and from the Americas, the Caribbean and Bermuda to have a passport or other accepted document that establishes identity and citizenship to enter or re-enter the U.S. Before the WHTI, driver's license and/or birth certificate was sufficient identification under the Western Hemisphere Exception (except for Mexico). Only 27 percent of U.S. citizens now have passports and only 40 percent of Canadian citizens. The passport requirement for all western hemisphere air travelers to and from the U.S. was implemented in January, 2007. The Department of State and DHS on March 26, 2008, announced the final rule for the land and sea portion of the WHTI, requiring travelers to present a passport or other approved secure documents proving citizenship and identity for all land and sea travel into the U.S. **This became effective June 1, 2009.**

The U.S. Travel Association has expressed concern that the new WHTI rules are not accompanied by a credible plan to inform travelers of the changing requirements. Although economic circumstances may be reducing cross border travel demand along the northern and southern land borders, congestion and delays continue at unacceptable levels and infrastructure improvements and better inspection processes are still needed.

**Recent data show a decline in cross border travel since the new June 1 ID requirements with a negative impact on business and commerce along the northern border, especially regarding tourism.**

Due to the failure of the Department of Homeland Security to meet a Congressional requirement to deploy a biometric (fingerprint) exit tracking system at all U.S. international airports for all travelers by June 30, 2009, no further expansion of the visa waiver program is now being allowed. Although DHS pilot biometric projects have been conducted at several airports, no permanent national system has been implemented.

**ISSUES:** (1) Balancing legitimate homeland security needs with the threat that tighter ID and inspection requirements might discourage international visitation to the U.S. (2) Ensuring further expansion of the visa waiver program.

**IMPORT:** International visitors are significant components of the U.S. tourism industry and policies, practices and procedures that delay or complicate their travel here reduce their positive economic impact.

**WSTPC POSITION:** The WSTPC supports tourism industry efforts to ensure that border crossing ID requirements are reasonably implemented, including traveler education and preparedness, and that any new requirements "first do no harm" by not having a negative impact on tourism.

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