

TRAVEL BUSINESS
ROUNDTABLE



April 21, 2005

The Honorable John Hostettler
Chairman
Subcommittee on Immigration, Border
Security and Claims
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sheila Jackson Lee
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Immigration, Border
Security and Claims
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman and Ranking Member:

On behalf of the U.S. travel and tourism industry, we urge your Subcommittee to support a one-year extension of the October 26, 2005 deadline for including biometric elements in passports of Visa Waiver Program countries. We appreciate your leadership in holding the oversight hearing on April 21 to address this critical deadline and ask that you include our letter in the hearing record.

Biometric passports are an important element in securing our borders. Definitive identification of international visitors through biometrics will allow U.S. inspections to admit legitimate travelers with greater confidence. This will increase security as well as lessen wait times at inspection.

The U.S. travel and tourism industry is grateful for the leadership of the House Judiciary Committee in working with the Departments of State and Homeland Security, and the governments of the 27 Visa Waiver Program countries, to ensure all parties are advancing their programs to meet this important security goal. Without the strong guidance of the House Judiciary Committee, it is very likely that the Visa Waiver Countries may not have progressed as far as they did as fast as they did. In both individual and group meetings, the travel industry has urged Visa Waiver countries to move as expeditiously as possible to meet these deadlines.

Reportedly, a number of important Visa Waiver Program countries will not be able to comply with the October 26, 2005 deadline. Additionally, our government does not have the ability to meaningfully use the biometric information contained in the passports. The Department of Homeland Security currently lacks document readers that can read all of the 27 prototype biometric passports. Without a "universal" passport reader, Homeland Security will receive no biometric security advantages for those passports it cannot read.

The U.S. travel and tourism industry is dedicated to supporting the federal government's work to help secure this nation from further terror attacks. The travel industry strongly supports the US-

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VISIT Program. This program collects biometric finger scans of international visitors regardless of the type of passport they carry. With the US-VISIT program in place, Congress can extend the deadline and have Homeland Security continue to collect biometric information on Visa Waiver Program travelers.

The travel industry has advocated that Congress and the Administration take actions and set policies that make our homeland more secure while at the same time not creating real or perceived barriers to legitimate travel to the United States. Securing the homeland is indeed the top priority. However, we are confident the U.S. government can achieve enhanced security goals while at the same time facilitating legitimate international travel to the United States.

Uncertainty in the marketplace will only discourage travel to the U.S. and could have a crippling effect on future travel bookings for this coming fall and beyond. The sooner Congress acts to statutorily extend this deadline, the sooner we can reassure these important tourism trading partners and the more than 13 million Visa Waiver Program visitors that they can continue to travel uninterrupted to the United States.

On behalf of the travel and tourism industry, we would like to thank you again for holding this important oversight hearing. We urge you to introduce and advance legislation through the U.S. Congress in an expeditious fashion to extend the biometric passport deadline by one year.

Sincerely,

Travel Business Roundtable
Travel Industry Association of America
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

cc: Hon. F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr., Chairman
Hon. John Conyers, Jr., Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives