



WESTERN HEMISPHERE TRAVEL INITIATIVE

Overview

The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) was created by the Departments of State and Homeland Security in response to a new law approved by Congress and signed by the President in late 2004. In response to concerns raised by the 9/11 Commission, this new law requires all travelers (including U.S. citizens) to have a passport or other accepted document that establishes identity and citizenship upon entry or re-entry into the U.S. from Central and South America, the Caribbean, Bermuda, Canada and Mexico. The travel industry has consistently supported WHTI, but insists the federal government implement the new rules in a manner that does not interrupt the flow of cross-border travel and trade and launch a major education campaign aimed at travelers on both sides of the border.

The first phase of the WHTI plan began on January 23, 2007 when a passport was required for all Western Hemisphere air travel into the U.S. The second phase includes travel through land and sea ports-of-entry, and in addition to a passport other acceptable travel documents will include the NEXUS traveler card (U.S./Canada), the SENTRI travel card (U.S./Mexico), a soon-to-be issued passport card from the State Department, as well as enhanced driver's licenses issued by either state or provincial governments.

Congress has acted more than once to extend the deadline for implementation of WHTI for land and sea travel into the U.S. As it stands currently, WHTI travel document requirements cannot be applied at land and sea ports-of-entry prior to June 2009, subject to several specific legislative requirements.

In a related development intended to ease the transition to full land/sea operation of WHTI, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security formally ceased accepting oral declarations of citizenship from U.S. and Canadian travelers entering at land border ports-of-entry starting January 31, 2008. The government is asking travelers to present a government-issued photo ID (driver's license) and a birth certificate to enter by land, but is doing "soft" enforcement during what it terms a "transition period."

Economics

From a U.S. travel perspective, the primary effect of the new WHTI travel document rules pertain chiefly to inbound travel from Canada and the following statistics are critical:

- Canadians made 40 million visits to the U.S. in 2006, making it the largest market for international visitors...
 - 16 million travelers (40%) stayed one or more nights.
 - The average overnight visit was 7.5 nights.
 - 24 million travelers (60%) returned the same day.
- What's at Risk: Each 5% reduction in travel from Canada to the U.S. will mean a loss of 400,000 travelers and \$671 million in visitor spending annually.

Outlook

The travel community will closely monitor any impacts on cross-border travel related to WHTI and continue to insist the federal government invest in a substantial education campaign. Several key Members of Congress from northern border states have weighed in with opposition to the January 31 transition rules ending acceptance of oral declarations and are also closely monitoring developments.