

DHS Announces Pre-Travel Authorization Program for U.S.-Bound Travelers from Visa Waiver Countries

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Office of the Press Secretary

Contact: 202-282-8010

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced today the Interim Final Rule for the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), a new online system that is part of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and is required by the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007.

“Rather than relying on paper-based procedures, this system will leverage 21st century electronic means to obtain basic information about who is traveling to the U.S. without a visa,” said Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

“Getting this information in advance enables our frontline personnel to determine whether a visa-free traveler presents a threat, before boarding an aircraft or arriving on our shores. It is a relatively simple and effective way to strengthen our security, and that of international travelers, while helping to preserve an important program for key allies.”

Once ESTA is mandatory, all nationals or citizens of VWP countries who plan to travel to the United States for temporary business or pleasure under the VWP will need to receive an electronic travel authorization prior to boarding a U.S.-bound airplane or cruise ship. The requirement will go into effect next year and does not affect U.S. citizens traveling overseas.

Currently, citizens of VWP countries complete a written I-94W form providing basic biographical, travel, and eligibility information while en-route to the U.S. With ESTA, VWP travelers will provide this information online prior to departure for the U.S.

ESTA will determine, almost immediately in many cases, if an individual is eligible for VWP travel, and if such travel poses any law enforcement or security risks. ESTA applications may be submitted at any time prior to travel, and once approved, will be valid for up to two years or until the applicant’s passport expires, whichever comes first. Authorizations will also be valid for multiple

entries into the U.S. To facilitate the authorization process, DHS recommends that ESTA applications be submitted as soon as an applicant begins planning U.S.-bound travel, and not less than 72 hours prior to travel.

On Aug. 1, 2008, the department will begin to accept voluntary applications through the ESTA Web site at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov>. Until ESTA is mandatory for all VWP travelers, however, ESTA applicants will also still need to complete an I-94W form en-route, for presentation at a U.S. port of entry. The Secretary of Homeland Security is anticipated to publish a notice in the Federal Register by mid-November 2008, announcing implementation of mandatory ESTA requirements on Jan. 12, 2009.

Last fiscal year, the U.S. welcomed more than 15 million VWP visitors. For more information about ESTA, please visit www.cbp.gov/travel.