



Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative Rule Outlines New Document Requirements for Air Travel

Release Date: November 22, 2006

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
Contact: (202) 282-8010

Today, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Department of State announced the official requirement for citizens of the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda to present a passport to enter the United States when arriving by air from any part of the Western Hemisphere beginning January 23, 2007.

"The ability to misuse travel documents to enter this country opens the door for a terrorist to carry out an attack. We can not continue to allow loopholes that could facilitate access to the United States through false claims of citizenship or fake identities," said DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff. "This initiative strengthens our border security by designating verifiable secure documents that may be used at our air ports of entry."

The travel document requirements make up the departments of State and Homeland Security's Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI). This change in travel document requirements is the result of recommendations made by the 9/11 Commission, which Congress subsequently passed into law in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative requires all citizens of the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Bermuda to have a passport or other accepted document that establishes the bearer's identity and nationality to enter or re-enter the United States from within the Western Hemisphere.

By limiting the types of documents presented will result in a more efficient border. There are more than 8,000 different state and local entities in the U.S., which issue birth certificates and driver's licenses. Currently, a CBP Officer needs to assess the authenticity of each birth certificate and license, regardless of when or where it was issued. The challenge at the borders is how to assess individual travelers, based on the documents they present, without significantly slowing the processing time for admission into the United States.

CBP Officers intercepted more than 75,000 fraudulent documents in FY2005 and apprehended over 84,000 individuals at the ports of entry trying to cross the border with fraudulent claims of citizenship or documents.

The only acceptable alternative documents to a passport for air travel will be the Merchant Mariner Document (MMD) and the NEXUS Air card. The MMD or "z-card" is issued by the U.S. Coast Guard to U.S. merchant mariners and the NEXUS Air card is issued to citizens of Canada and the United States, lawful permanent residents of the United States and permanent residents of Canada who meet certain eligibility requirements. The NEXUS Air card may only be accepted when used in conjunction with the NEXUS Air program. The MMD card may only be accepted when used on official business by U.S. Citizen Merchant Mariners. Members of the United States military, when traveling on official orders, may continue to present their military ID and orders for entry.

A separate proposed rule addressing land and sea travel will be published at a later date proposing specific requirements for travelers entering the United States through land and sea border crossings. As early as January 1, 2008, U.S. citizens traveling between the United States and Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Bermuda by land or sea will be required to present a valid U.S. passport or other documents as determined by the Department of Homeland Security. While recent legislative changes permit a later deadline, the Departments of State and Homeland Security are working to meet all requirements as soon as possible. Ample advance notice will be provided to enable the public to obtain acceptable documents for land and sea entries.

Those wishing to view the final rule may visit www.dhs.gov or travel.state.gov. The rule will be published in the Federal Register on Friday, November 24, 2006, where it can be viewed at www.regulations.gov.

###