

NBTA Comments on Visa Waiver Electronic Authorization

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Today, the National Business Travel Association (NBTA), the authoritative voice of the business travel community, expressed support for the progress announced today by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on implementation of the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) for Visa Waiver Program travelers.

Under Section 711 of the Implementing the Unfinished Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, signed into law by President Bush last August, DHS is required to meet a number of necessary security enhancements before admitting new countries into the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), including the deployment of ESTA. ESTA will require VWP travelers to submit basic biographic information, similar to information required on the standard I-94W form for nonimmigrant travelers, prior to departure for the United States. ESTA, expected to go into effect January 12, 2009, is an important security enhancement to review prospective travelers, and its deployment is a crucial step toward the vital expansion of the VWP. DHS has signed memoranda of understanding with the following countries to outline their commitments to security and to place them on the road to VWP participation during 2008: Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, and South Korea (see NBTA's April 18 press release).

While NBTA appreciates the procedural step announced by DHS today in publishing the proposed ESTA regulation, it remains concerned about how ESTA will be implemented in practice. First, the new security requirements must be widely and effectively advertised to prospective travelers. Second, DHS must include options for last-minute travelers and those who arrive at the airport unaware of the new program. Some news reports have indicated that applications must be made at least 72 hours prior to departure for the United States. However, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said that while DHS recommends applications be made at least 72 hours before travel, the ESTA program will be designed to facilitate travelers who apply inside of 72 hours. Third, the Department of State must have sufficient resources to interview individuals who are denied ESTA authorization and therefore must be approved for a visa. These concerns were previously communicated to DHS in an October 17, 2007 letter to Secretary Chertoff.

Bill Connors, CTC, NBTA Executive Director & COO, commented, 'The U.S. Congress created an excellent framework for simultaneously expanding the Visa Waiver Program and enhancing the program's security. We support this balanced approach, and urge that security enhancements such as the Electronic System for Travel Authorization be deployed in a manner that recognizes the value of VWP travel.'

The National Business Travel Association (NBTA) is the world's premier business travel organization. U.S.-based NBTA and its regional subsidiaries - NBTA Asia Pacific, NBTA Canada and NBTA Mexico - serve more than 3,200 members in 30 nations around the globe. NBTA has 41 U.S. Chapters with more than 5,000 members. NBTA members are corporate and government travel and meetings managers, as well as travel service providers, who collectively manage and direct more than US\$170 billion of global business travel expenditures annually. The association provides industry-leading networking, education & professional development, research, news & information, and advocacy.

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