

Electronic System for Travel Authorization

Overview – Electronic System for Travel Authorization

The Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) is a new security program for travelers to the United States from Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries. Unveiled in June and available for use by VWP travelers on a voluntary basis on August 1, 2008, the ESTA requirement becomes mandatory for travelers starting on January 12, 2009. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has indicated it will demonstrate enforcement flexibility during an initial implementation period.

Under ESTA, VWP travelers are required to complete an online form (essentially an electronic I-94) with biographical information and travel details prior to their departure. The form will be submitted to DHS, which will check this information against government databases and approve the traveler to board a flight to the United States. ESTA approval is not a guarantee of admission to the United States upon arrival at a U.S. port of entry. ESTA is modeled after a similar, successful program in Australia. One major benefit of ESTA is the eventual elimination of the paper-based I-94 form, which will improve the entry process for international visitors. An ESTA approval is valid for two years.

ESTA Is Necessary to Maintain and Expand the Visa Waiver Program

ESTA is one of several proposed security enhancements that has enabled the Visa Waiver Program to survive and expand. ESTA allows for more confidence in the VWP by pre-screening individual travelers before they board flights bound for the United States. Because Congress tied future expansion of the VWP in mid-2009 and beyond to this and other security measures (biometric air exit), ESTA should be viewed as an investment in the preservation and expansion of the VWP.

Funding for a new public-private partnership to more effectively communicate U.S. security policies to international travelers and promote inbound travel is also tied to the ESTA system. Under the Travel Promotion Act, a nominal (\$10) fee would be attached to the ESTA process to pay for this strategic communications program. DHS currently charges no fee for ESTA, but a small processing fee is expected in the near future.

Travel Community Concerns with ESTA

While the travel community supports ESTA, we have communicated the following concerns to DHS:

- The lack of a robust communications program to explain the ESTA process and benefits to prospective international travelers;
- The absence of a non-Internet solution for those seeking ESTA approval;
- The lack of any detailed plan to fulfill the DHS commitment to assist travelers needing to submit ESTA applications immediately prior to traveling; and
- The need to have a “redress” process for those individuals mistakenly denied ESTA approval.