

Homeland Security to Test RFID

The U.S. government plans to use RFID technology as a means to quickly and accurately identify visitors at U.S. ports of entry.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Jan. 28, 2005—The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced this week that it will begin testing RFID technology at five U.S. border-crossing points by July 31, after the technology is tested at a simulated port this spring. This proof-of-concept deployment, which the DHS says will continue through the spring of 2006, is part of the US-VISIT program that the DHS launched last year in order to heighten border security by taking digital fingerprints and photos of all non-U.S. visitors entering the U.S.

Each RFID tag will carry a unique serial ID number that links to the visitor's digital fingerprints and photos and other personal information in the US VISIT database. No personal information will be stored on the chips. When an RFID tag is issued to a person, that tag will be assigned a unique ID number that can not be altered. U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers will read the tags over secure communication paths to ensure that unauthorized devices cannot read the tags' unique ID. These measures are being enforced to secure the RFID tags and address possible privacy concerns among visitors to whom they are issued. The tags are passive, meaning they do not actively transmit information, and will not be linked to Global Positioning Satellite devices or other tracking schemes that would allow visitors to be tracked beyond a U.S. border.

Visitors enroll in the US-VISIT program when they apply for a U.S. visa. At a visa-issuing site overseas, a State Department official records a visa applicant's biographic information, takes a digital photo of the applicant and uses a scanner to capture the digital fingerprints of the applicant's right and left index fingers. Upon the visitor's arrival in the United States, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer also takes a digital photo of the visitor and uses a scanner to electronically capture the fingerprints of the same two fingers. The officer compares the visitor's biographic and digital fingerprints and photo with those captured by the State Department at the time the visa was issued to confirm that the visitor is the same person who received the visa.

So far the US-VISIT program has collected biographic and biometric information from more than 17.5 million foreign visitors who have passed through the 50 busiest land ports of entry, 115 airports and 15 seaports. To date, more than 407 people have been denied admission into the U.S. based on the biometric data gathered from them through US-VISIT program, according to the DHS.

The DHS says RFID will allow Customs and Border Protection officers to assign a unique and automatic identifier to pedestrians and visitors crossing in vehicles and also record their arrival and departure times at the borders. It could give border personal quick verification on the length of a person's stay in the U.S., as well as whether he or she overextended the visa.

Asa Hutchinson, undersecretary for Border and Transportation Security for the DHS, remarked in a statement that using RFID technology is a way to improve national security and also to make "the most important infrastructure enhancements to the U.S. land borders in more than 50 years."

Testing of the technology will begin at U.S. entry ports located at Nogales East and Nogales West in Arizona; Alexandria Bay in New York; and the Pacific Highway and Peace Arch in Washington. The various weather conditions and traffic flows at the ports will test the speed and reliability of the RFID system to capture the RFID tags' ID number accurately and quickly.

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