DHS Completes E-Passport Test at SFO

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security will now select the interrogators and inlays it will use for its nationwide e-passport deployment.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Apr. 18, 2006—The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) wound up a three-month test at the San Francisco International Airport to evaluate the ability of RFID interrogators to read RFID inlays embedded in passports, known as e-passports, issued by the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. The department is now analyzing the results in order to determine which of the tested interrogators and inlays it will chose for a nationwide deployment.

The interrogators must be rolled out by Oct. 26. After this date, all visitors from the 27 countries in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) must carry e-passports and the ports of entry for these travelers must be RFID-enabled. Encoded to each e-passport's inlay will be biographic and biometric information about the passport holder. The VWP enables nationals of certain countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without obtaining a visa.

The DHS will also use the test results to determine which inlays it will use in the e-passports it expects to issue to U.S. citizens, starting in late 2006 or early 2007.

"The test was a success," says Robert Mocny, the deputy director of US-VISIT program, which is deploying a number of measures to increase U.S. border security. He says that during the SFO test, a total of 1,398 e-passports were interrogated, and the systems' performance pointed to significant progress in tag readability since the government first started testing e-passports in 2004. He adds, however, work still needs to be done. "The biggest problem was the difference in time that the readers took in reading chips from the different countries' passports," he says. "Some countries' chips were read more quickly than others."

The test also measured the ergonomics of the interrogators and how easily and quickly the inspection agents involved in the test could present the e-passports to the readers.

Mocny said that in the coming weeks, the DHS will be working with the vendors of the interrogators to look at inconsistencies in read times and any problems reported with the machines' ergonomics.

Models from 3M, Viisage and Rochford Thompson were used in the test, according to the DHS. The interrogators were capable of reading inlays that protect data through a security system called Basic Access Control (see DHS Testing E-Passports in San Francisco).

The DHS has not revealed the names of the companies that supplied the chips or inlays embedded in the tested e-passports. All the e-passports are designed in compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards.