

# GAO Report Highlights RFID Weaknesses in US-VISIT

Citing low read rates of an RFID system that US-VISIT is testing, as well as other concerns, the Government Accountability Office wants an updated report on the goals and progress of the program.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Dec. 21, 2006—A new report from the [U.S. Government Accountability Office \(GAO\)](#), the investigative arm of the United States Congress, concludes that "strategic, operational and technical challenges" are hampering the [Department of Homeland Security's](#) plans for its [U.S. Visitor's Immigrant Status Indicator Technology \(US-VISIT\)](#) program initiatives at U.S. land ports of entry (as opposed to air and water ports). The [GAO US VISIT Program Challenges.pdf 94-page report](#) points to the low performance of an RFID system that has been tested at select land borders, where some categories of non-U.S. visitors are issued RFID-enabled entrance forms, called I-94a forms.

Each passive UHF RFID tag carries a unique serial ID number linked to the visitor's digital fingerprints, photos and other personal information taken when the visitor enters the country and saved in the US-VISIT database (see [Homeland Security to Test RFID](#)). The US-VISIT program is designed to tighten security at U.S. borders, and to record the movement of non-U.S. citizens across those borders, in an effort to protect the country from terrorist attacks.

Visitors issued the RFID-enabled entrance form must carry it with them as they exit the country. Since the technology is still being deployed as a test, there is no penalty issued to those who present their form so it can be easily read as they exit. Interrogators are installed at the car exit lane and pedestrian exit corridor at the land borders. Customs officials do not stop persons (whether under the US-VISIT program or not) as they leave the country, but RFID interrogators are supposed to read the RFID tag in the form.

The goal of reading the form's tag is to let the DHS identify anyone who has not left the country when the amount of time they can stay in the United States has expired. The GAO report shows that at some ports, the system showed very poor RFID read rates. At a pedestrian exit, for instance, only 67 percent of the tags carried by a test group of exiting visitors were successfully read. At the Thousand Islands Bridge border station in New York, the system reads only 4 percent of the tags for visitors in cars as they passed through the exit gates.

Jarrod Agen, a DHS spokesperson, says the RFID performance statistics cited in the report are more than a year old, and that US-VISIT has made significant improvements since then. One reason for the improvements, he explains, is a campaign encouraging visitors leaving by car to hold the tagged I-94a forms up to their car windows as they drive through the border's exit lanes so readers can detect them, and for those leaving on foot to hold the form out as well. Among visitors who follow these recommendations, current read rates of the forms recorded at exit land border lanes range from 64 to 95 percent, according to the DHS. Among those who do not make an attempt to ensure readability of the tag, read rates are still low—14 to 46 percent—for

those leaving in vehicles, because the metallic car bodies tend to interfere with the RF signals.

The DHS began testing the RFID technology at five U.S. border-crossing points in 2005. To date, 459,000 of the RFID-enabled forms have been distributed. The department says the documents' read rates at entrances—where the system reads them right after they are newly issued, or when presented by visitors who have already been issued the forms on a previous visit—are higher than at the exit points. Visitors at entrance points are also stopped and questioned, which leaves them within the read zone for a longer period of time. The system successfully reads 95 percent of the forms issued to pedestrians upon entry, a DHS spokesperson says, while 27 to 86 percent of the forms within vehicles are read at entrance points (the percentages vary from one land port to the next).

When it rolled out the US-VISIT program, the DHS decided to install cameras and fingerprint scanners at land border entrances, allowing the system to collect biometrics of select categories of visitors—specifically, international travelers from countries in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Thus far, the DHS has not installed biometric equipment or an infrastructure to compare the biometrics of visitors leaving the country with those collected upon entry. Doing so, the department decided, would be too expensive.

What's more, Agen says, most land borders have only one exit lane for cars, and the likely traffic congestion that would result from making visitors stop at the exit gates and submit to biometric screening would be too problematic. Therefore, the US-VISIT program is relying only on the collection of the I-94a forms' RFID data to ascertain that visitors have left the country. By knowing which visitors have departed, government officials can track down those who have not left at the end of their permitted stays.

The report criticizes the DHS's RFID-based exit-monitoring system, saying it does not meet the US-VISIT program's mandate to identify visitors biometrically, and that the use of RFID as it is deployed does not prevent someone from leaving the country with someone else's RFID-enabled form.

**RELATED\_ARTICLES** The GAO requests that the DHS issue a report on how it plans to move to a biometrically based identification system requiring departing visitors to submit to a photo and fingerprint scan at land border exits. The agency also wants to know how the DHS will mitigate any negative impacts caused by such a system (for example, increased processing times and traffic congestion at border crossings).

Some recent news reports have indicated that the DHS has decided to drop its plans to add biometric equipment, and to interview visitors at land border exits. Agen, however, claims that is not true. "We are not abandoning plans for using biometrics at [land] exits," he says, adding that no deadlines have been set for the DHS to use biometrics at land borders under US-VISIT. When the department can deploy the technology in a cost-effective manner—and in a way that will not cause major traffic problems—it says it will eventually deploy biometrics.

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