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Electronic Travel Authorization: Important for Safer and More Secure Overseas Travel

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On June 3, 2008, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) took the next step toward mandatory implementation of the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). By streamlining the current entry-screening process, ESTA enhances security screening at ports of entry into the United States while reducing inconvenience to America's guests.

Currently, travelers from visa-waiver countries—countries whose travelers are permitted to enter the U.S. without a traditional visa—are required to fill out a paper form and undergo screening upon entering U.S. soil. ESTA, however, allows for pre-screening of travelers through an online application, thereby expediting the entry of travelers from visa-waiver countries into the U.S. Subsequently, security screeners will be able to focus on “high risk” travelers who may represent security threats. Yet, in order to preserve these new security measures, DHS must act quickly to resolve roadblocks preventing full ESTA participation.

Eliminates Hassles and Requires Minimal Personal Information. ESTA increases convenience for the legitimate traveler by eliminating the more burdensome aspects of the entry-point screening process, thereby ensuring that travelers will not arrive in the U.S. only to be denied entry. After approval online, travelers are not required to reapply for two years; convenient travel is available with the click of a mouse.

Furthermore, ESTA compels travelers to submit only the same information currently required on

the paper (I-94) form—information commonly requested of U.S. travelers—soliciting answers that a legitimate traveler would have no qualms about revealing, such as information involving communicable disease and illegal activity.

Fostering Diplomatic Ties. The implementation of ETSA is a requirement for adding new countries to the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). VWP is vital for enhancing U.S. public diplomacy. Bilateral agreements formed between the U.S. and visa-waiver countries foster diplomatic relationships by initiating security and cooperation dialogue between nations. The Bulgarian Prime Minister reiterated this point when he called designation of Bulgaria as a future visa-waiver country “a clear sign of trust” by the United States.

Increasing Protection of the Homeland. Pre-screening for security risks improves authorities' ability to prevent high-security risk individuals from entering the U.S. Rather than risking a bureaucratic snafu at a domestic point-of-entry, ESTA's improvements to the current pre-screening process provide U.S. inspectors with an opportunity to identify potentially dangerous travelers before they arrive on U.S. soil.

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Remove Roadblocks to ESTA Participation. In order to secure full ESTA participation, DHS must eliminate or reform several of the program's cumbersome and less effective features. A more user-friendly structure would:

- **Ensure access for all potential users.** DHS should ensure that access is available to non-English speakers as well as individuals who make travel arrangements offline.
- **Establish a grievance procedure.** DHS must establish a process that gives denied applicants an explanation for their rejection. Additionally, this process should include a means through which erroneous denials of applications can be remedied.
- **Focus on quality control.** DHS must institute the highest standards regarding ESTA technol-

ogy. Unreliable databases and/or unreliable software will threaten the legitimacy of the program.

Conclusion: Security and Efficiency. ESTA is a model for domestic entry-screening initiatives. Through a combination of expediency and efficiency, ESTA satisfies two seemingly disparate goals: securing the homeland and facilitating efficient travel into the United States. Furthermore, ESTA's benefits extend beyond mere ease and convenience of travel for qualified individuals; the program also provides substantial economic, diplomatic, and security benefits to the United States.

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