

10 Prints Are Better Than 2, Homeland Security Says

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Under the stern gaze of passport officials and the even sterner gaze of television cameras, the two British citizens, fresh off a morning flight from London on Tuesday, passed through customs at Kennedy International Airport separately and came to separate conclusions.

Both pressed one thumb, then the other fingers on the glowing screen of a small white box. Then the process was repeated for the other hand.

It was a new customs requirement, a 21st-century way of recording fingerprints. A little less than a minute later, both were cleared.

“It was nice and simple and makes sense to me,” said David Hughes, 45, a beverage consultant living in London, “although I think the fingerprint lady was a little overawed by all the cameras.”

Edward Docx, 35, a London-based novelist here on book tour, disagreed. “What would Mark Twain or F. Scott Fitzgerald say about this?” he asked. “I would think they would say, ‘No Thanks.’ ”

“This felt like, What else do you want from me?” Mr. Docx continued. “Pretty soon it’ll be a full naked body scan, with my irises and my DNA profile. It makes the honest visitor to America, of which 99.9999 percent coming through here are, feel unwelcome so you guys can catch the 0.0001 percent of people who are a problem.”

Mr. Docx and Mr. Hughes were among the first foreign travelers to undergo the Department of Homeland Security’s new 10-finger screening process, unveiled for the news media on Tuesday.

The system is being tested at nine other major airports in the United States and has been under some form of testing since 2004. It will be reviewed for final approval in December.

The previous Homeland Security system involved the recording of only the left and right index fingers.

If the new system passes muster, it will eventually be introduced almost everywhere there is a Customs officer — some 311 land, air and sea entry points, including those along the Mexico and Canada borders where visitors enter on foot or by automobile.

Officials said that the system would apply to the 80 percent of foreign nationals who are required to carry visas and are between the ages of 14 and 79. Diplomats and a few others are exempt.

People holding American passports are also exempt, although the United Kingdom and the European Union are considering similar systems that would require American visitors to Europe to submit to some form of fingerprinting. Europe's considering of the system was one reason cited by Homeland Security officials for installing its 10-fingerprint process.

The old system, introduced in 2004, detected more than 2,000 violators of immigration laws, Homeland Security officials told reporters. It captured some 90 million fingerprints. But it also yielded false matches.

The new system, whose image-capture units each cost as much as \$3,000, will eventually cost more than \$280 million, paid for by the federal government, rather than the airlines.

The recording of such identifiers as fingerprints on computers is known as biometrics.

Robert Mocny, director of U.S.-Visit, the Homeland Security program that administers the new system, said Interpol estimated that 6.7 million passports had been lost or stolen, a security risk of major proportions.

Even under the old flawed fingerprints system, there were some successes, Mr. Mocny said.

In one case at Kennedy, Mr. Mocny said, there was a man who carried a valid passport, and his appearance matched his passport photo.

But his two fingerprints identified him as a man who had once been caught filming a military installation.

The man had stolen the passport, Mr. Mocny said, from his identical twin brother.

On an average day, Homeland Security officials say, nearly 14,400 international visitors pass through Kennedy International customs.

The new system clears passengers well within the 50-to-90-second interview "window," as did the two-finger system, officials said.

But that was not what was on the mind of Mr. Hughes, the beverage consultant. "What do they do with all this after they've gotten it?" he asked.

In Britain last year, two computer discs containing government records of 25 million people — including names, home addresses and bank account information — were lost in the mail.

“All of our information just went walking, like that,” Mr. Hughes said.