

U.S. relaxing new passport rules for children

White House expected to announce decision to ease regulations Thursday

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration is expected to announce on Thursday that it will exempt children from new rules that will require people to show passports when entering the U.S. at land or sea borders.

The new passport requirements are expected to take effect as soon as January 2008. But under the expected announcement, children aged 15 or younger with parental consent will be allowed to cross the borders at land and sea entry points with a certified copy of their birth certificates rather than passports.

Children aged 16 through 18 traveling with school, religious, cultural or athletic groups and under adult supervision will also be allowed to travel with only their birth certificates.

The details were described by a Department of Homeland Security official who requested anonymity because the announcement has not yet been made.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff was expected to announce the relaxation in rules at a speech in Detroit on Thursday afternoon.

Beginning last January 23, nearly all air travelers entering the U.S. who are citizens of Canada, Mexico, Bermuda or the Caribbean — as well as returning American citizens — have been required to display passports. Children entering the United States by air will still be required to show passports.

The Homeland Security official said the easing of rules for children entering by land or sea was in part the result of talks between the department and Canadians and interested state officials. Canada and U.S. border states have been concerned that the passport requirements would hurt legitimate travel and commerce.

When the new requirements for travelers crossing land and sea borders take effect, it will bring residents of Western Hemisphere nations under the same rules as travelers from the rest of the world.

The rules were mandated by Congress in 2004 as a response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the recommendations by the Sept. 11 commission that border security be tightened.

Last October, Congress passed an amendment sponsored by Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, that would postpone the day the land and sea rules take effect for as long as 17 months, till June 2009, if certain conditions have not been met.

One of those conditions was to develop an alternative procedure for groups of children traveling across the border under adult supervision and with parental consent.

Chertoff will meet with local officials in Detroit before traveling to Ottawa, Canada, for meetings Friday with his Mexican and Canadian counterparts.