

Feds to suspend border passport rule

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration is poised to suspend a major post-9/11 security initiative to cope with increasingly angry complaints from Americans whose summer vacations are threatened by new passport rules.

A proposal, expected to be announced Friday, will temporarily waive a requirement that U.S. citizens have passports to fly to and from Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean and Bermuda, provided the traveler can prove he or she has already applied for a passport, officials said Thursday.

The temporary lifting of the passport rule is aimed at clearing a massive backlog of passport applications at the State Department that has slowed processing to a crawl, they said. Rep. Heather Wilson (news, bio, voting record), R-N.M., said the suspension would last until the end of September.

The plan had run into opposition from the Homeland Security Department, which controls U.S. border points and fears the move could make it easier for terrorists or other undesirables to enter the country, the officials said.

Instead of a passport, travelers will now be able to present a State Department receipt showing their passport application is being processed, and a government-issued ID such as a driver's license.

Homeland Security signed off on the proposal on Thursday after consultations with the State Department, the White House and members of Congress, who have been deluged with complaints from furious constituents, according to four officials at the agencies involved.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the decision has not yet been announced.

A Homeland Security spokesman declined to comment.

Under the plan, those without passports would receive additional security scrutiny when they travel, which could include extra questioning or bag checks, according to one official familiar with the discussions.

The suspension will give the State Department time to deal with a surge in applications that has overwhelmed its processing centers since the new rules took effect earlier this year.

The backlog has caused up to three-month delays in issuing passports and ruined or delayed the travel plans of untold thousands of Americans.

Frustrated lawmakers besieged with constituent complaints have demanded relief.

Rep. Thomas Reynolds (news, bio, voting record), R-N.Y., whose district lies near the Canadian border, said White House officials have been on Capitol Hill trying to work out a compromise amid what he called a turf war between State and Homeland Security.

"White House personnel have seen the problem and they've been on Capitol Hill working with members," said Reynolds. "I expect a plan to be forthcoming that ... would not require a passport as long as you had an application receipt for filing for the passport."

The State Department has hired hundreds of new passport adjudicators, put employees to work around the clock and opened a new processing facility in Arkansas but has still been unable to meet the demand.

Initial hopes that the delays could be overcome were dashed this month when more than a million requests for new passports were dumped at once on the facilities by banks contracted to clear application fee checks, a senior State Department official said.

The passport application surge is the result of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative that since January has required U.S. citizens to use passports when entering the United States from Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean by air.

The travel initiative, which next year will require either passports or yet-to-be developed wallet-sized passcards to be presented at land border crossings, is part of a broader package of immigration rules enacted after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

It has caused deep annoyance, particularly from those who live in border states and make routine, legal crossings into Canada and Mexico for business and pleasure.

Wilson, whose state is on the Mexican border, said she had been calling on State and Homeland Security to implement a suspension for two weeks.

"I said, 'You need to take action. This is completely screwed up'," she said. "To say people must have a passport to travel and not give people a passport is right up there in the stupid column."

Wilson said her office took more than 500 calls in May alone from constituents struggling to get passports and the problem has spread from border states to Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas and Colorado.

Between March and May of this year, the department issued more than 4.5 million passports, a 60 percent increase over the same period in 2006, but millions more applications are waiting to be processed, according to consular affairs officials.

The demand is such that the State Department has warned applicants to allow as long as 12 weeks for their passports to be issued and up to three weeks for expedited processing at an extra fee. Previously, the maximum wait was six weeks and two weeks, respectively.

In the meantime, would-be foreign travelers stew and fret.

Angela Pezzimenti, a recent college graduate from Allegany, N.Y., barely got her passport in time to make a trip to Europe last month.

"It was nerve-racking," said the 21-year-old, who finally received her passport three days before the trip. "I was really afraid that it wasn't going to come in time. We had everything planned, our tickets were bought, and I was pretty worried."

Wendy Berry of Franklin, W.Va., applied in March for a passport for her 18-year-old son, Jonathan. But the day he was to leave to visit his sister in Peru, his passport hadn't come.

"There are two things I wish they would do," she said of the government. "The only really responsible party is the Passport Office. I wish they would be held accountable. And I wish they would staff more people. The whole system is ready to collapse."