

Passport crisis may be nearing end

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WASHINGTON - Passport delays got your summer travel plans in limbo? You may be able to rest easier.

The State Department says it is cranking out U.S. passports in historically high numbers to meet an unprecedented surge in demand caused by tough new immigration rules.

Last week, it issued a record 412,000 of the documents, the most ever issued over a seven-day period, easily besting the only week-old previous high mark of 379,000, the department said in a statement on Monday.

"Passport production has hit record highs as the department works diligently to honor its mission and ensure that every citizen gets a passport in time for planned travel," it said.

A boost in staffing and overtime and weekend hours at the 17 passport agencies has succeeded in reducing some processing delays that had threatened a huge number of overseas vacations for Americans and sparked congressional concern, it said.

Expedited applications, which require an additional fee, will now again be processed in two weeks, down from four at the height of the crisis. Standard applications will still take ten weeks, the department said.

In March, the department warned a crush of new passport applicants — more than 1 million a month — had inundated its staff and caused extended delays at the peak of the January-to-April season when many people prepare to travel over the spring and summer.

The surge was made worse by a new regulation that took effect this year requiring Americans to have passports when traveling by air to any country, including Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

Applications between last October and March rose 44 percent over the same period in 2005-2006, according to the State Department, which said it expected to process about 17 million passports in 2007.

Some 74 million Americans now have valid U.S. passports.