For Some Travelers, a Shorter Wait at Border

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HIDALGO, Tex. -- One recent spring day, Jorge Tello walked into a U.S. Customs and Border Protection office here and gave the government permission to run his name and fingerprints -- as well as his wife's -- through numerous criminal background checks, terrorist databases and terrorist watch lists.

Not only was he eager to forfeit their privacy, he paid the government a fee to scrutinize them. The Tellos want to become "trusted travelers" in the eyes of federal authorities, a privilege that gets them out of the sometimes hours-long wait on the Hidalgo-Reynosa bridge and into the border-crosser's version of an HOV lane. It's called the low-risk commuter lane, and it's for vetted travelers and their specially inspected vehicles.

This summer, those lanes will open at the three busiest bridge crossings on the southernmost end of the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border -- none too soon for Tello.

"I'm too old to wait three hours on my way back from Mexico," said Tello, 75. "My wife is 80 years old and on dialysis. In the summer, it's over 100 degrees out there, and no car can be idling for hours there with the air conditioner on. I'm scared she's going to die."

The Tellos -- he is a naturalized U.S. citizen, and she is a legal permanent resident -- go to Reynosa to visit their son, who is a Mexican citizen and does not have the proper documents to enter the United States. But in this post-9/11 era of tighter border security and delays to get into the United States, the Tellos were considering giving up their cross-border trips.

Instead, they enrolled in the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection program, or SENTRI. "This is an opportunity to solve our problem," Tello said.

SENTRI arrives Tuesday at international bridge crossings in Hidalgo and Brownsville and in three weeks at Laredo, the latest sites to implement the program, which has gained popularity at U.S. border crossings since the security climate changed after the terrorist attacks in 2001.

The program was introduced in 1995 at the Otay Mesa port of entry in San Diego and has since opened at five other southern border crossings. A parallel program called Nexus operates at 11 border crossings along the Canadian border, and commercial travelers can enroll in a similar program called Free and Secure Trade, or FAST. Currently, 81,000 travelers are enrolled in SENTRI, 100,000 in Nexus and 73,000 in FAST.

The object is to give frequent travelers -- the thousands who live in the United States and work in Mexico, or who live in Mexico and drive their children to U.S. schools, or who visit family on either side of the border -- an easier commute.

At the same time, Customs and Border Protection agents get detailed information on who is entering the country before they drive across the border. Customs officials at airports receive that kind of information on overseas travelers from the airlines, which since the 2001 attacks must participate in the Advanced Passenger Information System program.

At land ports of entry, customs officials must determine who is arriving "from scratch on site," said John Wagner, director of passenger automation programs at Customs and Border Protection.

SENTRI "gives us knowledge about who's crossing [regularly] at the border -- generally commuters -- and we get them out of our way. That gives us more time to deal with the people we don't know anything about and haven't seen before," he said.

Under SENTRI, participants pay a fee to undergo extensive background checks. If they are cleared, participants are called in for a follow-up interview and more checks. The vehicle that will be used to cross the border is inspected to ensure it has no secret compartments that can be used for smuggling drugs or other contraband. Only people vetted and registered with SENTRI may ride in the vehicle through the low-risk commuter lanes.

Mexican or Canadian nationals who have the proper border-crossing documents may apply for the SENTRI or Nexus programs.

A decal embedded with radio frequency identification technology is attached to the windshield of the vehicle, and every SENTRI enrollee is given an identification card enabled with the technology. The commuter lanes are equipped with radio receivers that read the identification number of the vehicle and of each enrollee's card from up to 35 feet away. Those numbers, along with photographs and background information, are transmitted to a computer manned by a customs agent at the inspection booth.

In San Ysidro, Calif., the busiest land crossing in the United States, 70,000 people and 37,000 vehicles are enrolled in SENTRI. Waits in the low-risk commuter lanes are a fraction of the waits in the general lanes, said Vince Bond, a Customs and Border Protection spokesman there. When general lanes have a 90-minute wait, the SENTRI lanes have a 15-minute wait. When there is an hour wait in the general lanes, there is a five-minute wait in the SENTRI lanes.

In El Paso, where 3,500 vehicles are enrolled in the program, waits in the SENTRI lanes are about three minutes, compared with half-hour or longer waits in the general lanes, said Roger Maier, a Customs and Border Protection spokesman there.

SENTRI travelers are still stopped at the inspection booth for cursory questioning and, on a random basis, they are subjected to more detailed questioning and inspection. Random checks have found violators whose "trusted traveler" privileges have been revoked and who have been arrested and prosecuted, depending on the infraction. Human and drug smugglers have been caught occasionally.

Recently at the San Ysidro port of entry, a Mexican citizen enrolled in SENTRI was caught with $35,000 in undeclared U.S. currency. The money was seized by customs officials, and the woman was prohibited from entering the United States.

"One thing we do is continually run the names through the [criminal and terrorist] databases, and we do random checks," Wagner said. "SENTRI is not a free pass into the United States."