

# State Department unveils trial of electronic passports

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By Danielle Belopotosky, National Journal's Technology Daily

The State Department on Friday announced it has started issuing electronic passports on a trial basis.

Diplomats received the first e-passports containing radio frequency "contactless chips" and face recognition technology in late December. The e-passport contains a chip, which is embedded into the cover of the document and includes a digital image of the traveler, as well as their name, date and place of birth, gender, passport number and dates of passport issuance and expiration.

Contactless chips "interact intelligently via RF with a contactless reader," according to the Smart Card Alliance's Web site. The chips used in the e-passports can be read "at a close distance," according to the department.

But privacy advocates have raised concerns over the possibility of someone in close proximity to the passport-holder who could use a chip reader to "skim," or steal, personal information from passports.

"The dangers of 'skimming' already have been the subject of serious public concern," the American Civil Liberties Union wrote in April 2005 comments to State over its proposal to use radio frequency identification chips in e-passports.

Low-frequency RFID chips be read from up to 20 feet, but the department has maintained e-passports would include chips that only can be read from "approximately four inches" away from the source.

To eschew concerns over privacy and safety, the department said the front covers of e-passports have a built-in anti-skimming device. It is akin to "wrapping them in tin foil to prevent the radio frequency signal from getting through," said Jay Stanley, communications director at the ACLU's Technology and Liberty Program.

The e-passports also are equipped with an encryption feature to prevent the interception of information by a third party, or what the department calls eavesdropping.

"It is certainly an improvement" over State's initial e-passport proposal, Stanley said. But the use of radio frequency technologies still creates a potential problem of security and identity theft. Questions remain over whether the chips still can be read without other people's knowledge and if the technology can be used as unique identifier even if it is encrypted, he said.

Another concern is how much the new passports will cost the consumer. The estimated cost for the government to produce e-passports would increase from the current \$2.40 to more than \$10 each, according to documents obtained by the ACLU. The figures were disclosed during a speech by Frank Moss, State's deputy assistant secretary for passport services.

Applicant fees for new paper-based passports currently total \$97 each. When e-passports are issued to all later this year, the passport fees for first time applicants will remain the same, according to the State Department.

The United States began testing e-passports at the San Francisco International Airport for citizens of Australia and New Zealand, as well as airline crew members from Singapore. The tests aim to determine whether the e-passport systems comply with standards developed by the International Civil Aviation Organization.

The nationwide rollout of e-passports is slated for the end of 2006. But, "the devil is in the details," said Stanley. The implementation still "needs to be scrutinized by the tech community."