

Statement of

The Honorable Orrin Hatch

United States Senator
Utah
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"Biometric Passports"

Good morning and welcome to the hearing on biometric passports. Since last fall, this Committee has held eight oversight hearings that substantially focus on our Nation's efforts to prevent and respond to terrorism on American soil. The purpose of these hearings is to make sure that the United States government is taking every possible step to protect this country and its citizens from the evil intentions of terrorists, and that every available resource is focused toward that end. Implementation of the biometric passport program will be an important resource in our fight against terrorism, and we should be vigilant in our efforts to fully implement the program.

Today, we focus our attention on the biometric passport requirement set out in the "Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act." This legislation provided crucial tools to tighten immigration procedures and close loopholes in our border security which were, in my view, of paramount importance after the catastrophic attacks this Nation suffered on September the 11th, 2001. I was proud to be an original cosponsor of this legislation, and am disappointed that more than two years after its enactment, we are faced with the reality that the biometric passport deadline of October 26, 2004 will not be met.

Now, I understand that when we called for the development and inclusion of biometric passports, the fundamental technologies were not yet mature. Nonetheless, many of us believed that we needed cutting-edge technology in order to thwart the increasingly sophisticated terrorists. This mandate has presented difficult challenges for the many capable scientists and technicians who have dedicated themselves to this effort. But we can - and must - demand that the countries who participate in the Visa Waiver Program begin producing and distributing these passports. Every day that biometric identifiers are not utilized, our country and its citizens are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. I strongly urge the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security to work with these participating countries in the upcoming months to establish an interoperable system for biometric passports.

I have spoken to Secretary of State Powell concerning the importance of the biometric passport issue, and during his testimony before this Committee last week, Secretary Ridge also emphasized the importance of this issue. Both of these men, whom I highly respect, have requested a two-year extension to the current biometric passport deadline of October 26th, 2004. However, I am concerned with the national security implications that such a lengthy extension may cause. Frankly, I would like to inquire why a one-year extension is not feasible for

implementation of the biometric passport program. As this deadline extension has implications on our national security, I hope that our witnesses today can fully explain to this Committee the reasons for extending the current biometric passport deadline.

Today, the Committee will hear from two panels of witness testimony. The first panel consists of testimony by the Honorable Maria Cantwell, Senator from the state of Washington. I would like to welcome Senator Cantwell, who was a cosponsor of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act. I know that she feels strongly about this issue, and I thank her for taking the time to appear before the Committee.

The second panel consists of testimony by the Honorable Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security at the Department of Homeland Security, and the Honorable Maura Harty, Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs at the Department of State. I welcome them to the Committee, and appreciate their testimony on this important issue of national security.