

Statement of
The Honorable John Cornyn

United States Senator
Texas
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Opening Statement - Senator John Cornyn
"US VISIT: Challenges and Strategies for Security the U.S. Border"

Thank you, Madam Chair.

As we move forward with our debate on immigration reform, we all recognize the importance of an immigration enforcement system that enhances the security of our citizens and visitors to the United States. No enforcement system, however, should be adopted without assessing the impact it will have on legitimate travel and trade to the United States. Our nation's security is paramount--but trade, especially with our partners on the northern and southern borders, is critical to the health of our economy.

The US-VISIT program is one component of an overall border and interior enforcement strategy. Since its inception in 2004, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has made significant progress in phasing-in implementation of the program at air, sea and land borders. DHS must continue working hard to ensure that it continually receives the input of the public and interested stakeholders on any expansion efforts, such as officials along the Texas border.

I remain concerned about the affect of the US-VISIT program on the southern border communities. According to DHS, the US-VISIT entry technology has been installed in most air and sea ports, and in the secondary inspection areas at 154 land borders. The Texas border region already has felt the effects of increased security screening at the border.

Southern border businesses and officials are concerned with the increased delays at border-crossing checkpoints and the impact of the delays on the local economy. As we continue working toward additional security measures, we need to develop a quick and efficient process to identify those who may be a threat to national security while allowing legitimate, law-abiding travelers to enter and exit the U.S. in a timely manner.

One significant initiative to facilitate trade and travel on the southern border is the introduction of my bill, S. 422. This legislation permits Mexican nationals who hold laser visas--and have already undergone rigorous background screening by the State Department and DHS--to remain in the United States for an initial period of six months. The bill allows for expedited entry into the U.S., while at the same time maintains the strong border-enforcement process. It also ensures that commerce on the southern border remains strong and viable--notwithstanding any new enforcement measures DHS may put in place.

DHS has indicated that the US-VISIT entry process has been beneficial, especially in terms of identifying criminals and immigration violators. DHS, however, also acknowledges that it needs additional resources and personnel to improve the existing entry process. We need to work with DHS to ensure that they get all the help they need to make the system successful.

Recently, DHS announced that it would delay implementation of US-VISIT "exit" procedures at land borders, in part due to the potentially significant delays in the flow of cross-border traffic, and the significant resources it will take to expand existing infrastructure and systems communications that are needed for the US-VISIT process to work effectively. I fully support Secretary Chertoff's decision to focus efforts on expansion of the US-VISIT program at airports, where the majority of travelers enter and exit the United States.

DHS should continue to explore various strategies for improving its ability to capture traveler biometrics and entry and exit information. With the movement to create a single, secure, biometric and machine-readable travel card, like the E-passport, DHS should work with industry leaders and stakeholders to determine how latest technologies, such as radio frequency identification technology (RFID) can best be incorporated into travel and entry/exit documents. DHS also needs to complete its law enforcement systems integration, which is the cornerstone of any successful law enforcement strategy.

With these improvements, we will eventually be able to have an integrated, entry-exit process that protects our nation's security and facilitates legitimate travel to and from the United States.

I yield the remainder of my time.
Thank you.