

Going somewhere? Not so fast.

Since 1986, the United States has maintained and operated a Visa Waiver Program (VWP) designed to streamline the visa process for citizens of certain countries, primarily European, making travel to the US more efficient and profitable for those citizens, whether for business or pleasure. Citizens of "program countries" enjoyed free and unrestricted travel in the US for periods of up to ninety days. However, with global concerns over travel and terrorism mounting, the United States has refined the visa waiver program, requiring travelers from these countries to notify the US electronically of their travel plans. Once notified of their travel plans, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) provides (or declines to provide) electronic authorization for their visit. Known as the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), the new strictures take effect on August 1, 2008.

It's a minor change, to be sure, but certainly one that seems to follow logically from America's increasing concerns over border security and general distrust of foreign travelers. Critics maintain that it is a step in the wrong direction, tightening borders against the very foreigners that are least likely to harm American interests—the intellectual and economic elites of the world. Further inciting criticism, the DHS currently plans to move ESTA to mandatory status beginning in 2009.

Despite criticism, the plan is not without merit. To its credit, DHS maintains that the electronic notification of travel suitability is virtually instantaneous, requiring nothing more than a check of the traveler's name against current law enforcement databases. And travelers who make frequent trips to the US won't be required to reapply through ESTA for each trip; in fact, travelers don't even need solid travel plans when they apply for authorization under VWP, since any authorization to travel under the visa waiver program remains good for two years

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