



EBTC INFORMATION BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: Passport plan is far behind schedule: U.S. report

SOURCE: CTV News

A plan that would require travellers crossing the U.S.-Canada border to present passports or a special I.D. card is far behind schedule, says the U.S. Congress in a report.

The U.S. government wants to have the plan in place by the end of the year.

But the report, released Wednesday, says neither the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) nor the State Department have made the key decisions necessary for the plan to go ahead.

"DHS and State have taken some steps to carry out the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative," says the report by the Government Accountability Office, an independent congressional agency, as outlined in *The Globe and Mail*.

"However, they have a long way to go to implement their proposed plans, and the time to get the job done is slipping by."

Under the proposed plan, both Americans and Canadians would need passports when crossing the border. Travellers by land would require passports by the end of 2007.

The U.S. Senate has passed legislation, however, to delay implementation of the plan until mid-2009 and a member of the House of Representatives intends to introduce a similar bill.

The report was released on the same day Prime Minister Stephen Harper joined premiers to urge Washington to delay the plan to require passports at the U.S. border.

Speaking in Gimli, Man., Harper said the passport requirement could have "a severely negative impact on both trade and tourism."

Border security was a major issue during Wednesday's so-called North American leaders' summit in Gimli, where premiers met with governors and ambassadors from the U.S. and Mexico.

After wrapping up the meeting, leaders said they wanted to delay the passport requirement until 2009. During that time, they hope to find a less expensive identification system.

Manitoba Premier Gary Doer told reporters that it would be "economic suicide" for both Canada and the United States if the law isn't delayed until 2009. He is also concerned the issue has the potential to strain U.S.-Canada relations as much as softwood lumber and the mad-cow crisis.

"I think it will be more of an irritant, because more people will be directly impacted," Doer said Wednesday.

"This will be much more of a people issue. Softwood lumber was a huge negative drift for five years, and it still remains a file that is going to be debated in this country in terms of what we received and what we gave up, but the border will be a populist issue for all Canadians and, I suggest, many Americans."

Harper said he believes there will be a delay in implementing the plan because of American concerns over how they will adapt to the passport requirement. But he added that Ottawa is making preparations if the plan does take effect next year.