

INFORMATION BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: Border talks

SOURCE: Toronto Star

Canada has scored "a big win" in talks aimed at unclogging choked border crossings, Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan said on the heels of series of trade and security meetings with his counterparts in Washington.

Hailing the Obama administration's willingness to explore innovative solutions to congested trade arteries, Van Loan came away with a commitment that the U.S. will reconsider "pre-clearance" for shipping across land borders.

He said they also agreed on a formal system of regular high-level meetings to monitor progress on all border issues.

"The objective was to lay a strong foundation for moving forward and I can say now we have achieved that objective," said Van Loan, who will now meet twice yearly with U.S. Homeland Secretary Janet Napolitano to "focus entirely on border issues."

"This is a very significant and positive development for Canada – a regular, high-level mechanism on border issues that has been absent to date. And that, for Canada, is a big win."

Van Loan said Napolitano also agreed to "look in a new light" at the concept of pre-clearing U.S.-bound Canadian trade goods at offsite locations in order to facilitate quick passage at land borders. The idea, he said, is to explore ways to

adapt similar pre-clearance approach already in place for U.S.-bound air passengers.

Napolitano, a former Arizona governor well-versed in Mexican border issues, earlier this year ordered a review of the northern border, a move interpreted by some to suggest Canada will see a "thickening," or tightening, of crossing rules.

Van Loan said he came away with the opposite impression in his meeting yesterday. "It shows she views the northern border in a different light. That was positive. And everything she said in our meeting reinforced that."

Apart from trade, however, Van Loan reminded reporters that tougher rules for regular Canadians and Americans crossing land borders are imminent, with the June 1 introduction of the Bush-era Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative – a move that will require everyone crossing a land border to carry a passport or enhanced driver's licence.

"We both agreed to make efforts to ensure that our populations are as ready as possible for that," Van Loan said.