

EXPAND THE VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

Background: Created by Congress in 1986, the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) encourages overseas business and leisure travel to the United States and strengthens homeland security and international travel protections.

- Citizens from VWP countries may visit the U.S. for 90 days without obtaining a non-immigrant visitor visa.
- To participate in the VWP, countries must be certified by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as meeting stringent security standards.
- In 2007, Congress provided the Secretary of Homeland Security authority to allow new countries into the VWP if the country's visa refusal rate is 10% or less versus the original standard of 3% or less.
- This authority sunset July 1, 2009.
- Bipartisan VWP expansion legislation (S. 2046/H.R. 3855) is pending in both the House and Senate which would reinstate the 10% waiver authority to DHS in order to again expand the program to qualified countries.
- The legislation has the enthusiastic support of President Obama, the travel community and the broader business community such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Economic Gains: VWP countries account for 65 percent of all overseas visitors to the U.S. – 17 million in total.

- In 2010, these visitors spent nearly \$61 billion, supported 433,000 American jobs, \$12 billion in payroll and generated \$9 billion in government tax revenues.
- Each overseas visitor spends an average of \$4,000 per visit.
- VWP visitors have made inbound travel America's top service export.
- VWP expansion drives economic expansion: In South Korea's first year in the program, spending by South Korean visitors surged 23 percent, adding an extra \$1 billion to the U.S. economy.
- If the 11 likeliest candidates achieved VWP status, the growth rate of their visits to the U.S. would nearly double. Including them this year would generate 4 million visitors and \$41 billion in revenue, supporting 256,000 American jobs.

Improved Security: To achieve and maintain VWP eligibility, countries are required to fully cooperate with the U.S. on counter-terrorism and law enforcement matters, adhere to strong document security standards, and demonstrate effective border and aviation security procedures. VWP is the only program that gives the United States the opportunity to conduct broad inspections of foreign security standards.

- VWP countries must issue secure electronic-passports and report information on all lost and stolen passports to the U.S. via INTERPOL.
- VWP countries must share information with U.S. authorities on travelers who may pose a terrorist or criminal threat. This allows our government to supplement our "watch list" databases with information from the travelers' home governments.
- Each traveler from a VWP country is pre-screened via the Electronic System Travel Authorization (ESTA) against multiple law enforcement and security databases.
- Working with additional U.S. allies to adopt the VWP's enhanced security measures will strengthen U.S. security and our partnerships in Europe, Asia, and South America.

Strengthened Diplomacy: VWP serves as an important public diplomacy tool because international visitors can experience America's values first-hand.

- Surveys of international visitors to the U.S. show they are more than 74 percent likely to have a favorable view of the country; 61 percent are more likely to support the U.S. and its policies.
- Expanding the VWP in 2008 and 2010 garnered significant diplomatic and security benefits for the U.S. The program should continue to engage countries from Latin America, Asia, and Europe.
- VWP countries are considered to be some of our nation's closest allies. Notably, none of the 36 nations currently in the program are from the Western Hemisphere, resulting in a missed opportunity to establish stronger partnerships with some of the world's fastest growing economies.