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Administration to Drop Effort to Track if Visitors Leave

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — In a major blow to the Bush administration's efforts to secure borders, domestic security officials have for now given up on plans to develop a facial or fingerprint recognition system to determine whether a vast majority of foreign visitors leave the country, officials say.

Domestic security officials had described the system, known as U.S. Visit, as critical to security and important in efforts to curb illegal [immigration](#). Similarly, one-third of the overall total of illegal immigrants are believed to have overstayed their visas, a Congressional report says.

Tracking visitors took on particular urgency after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when it became clear that some of the hijackers had remained in the country after their visas had expired.

But in recent days, officials at the [Homeland Security Department](#) have conceded that they lack the financing and technology to meet their deadline to have exit-monitoring systems at the 50 busiest land border crossings by next December. A vast majority of foreign visitors enter and exit by land from Mexico and Canada, and the policy shift means that officials will remain unable to track the departures.

A report released on Thursday by the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, restated those findings, reporting that the administration believes that it will take 5 to 10 years to develop technology that might allow for a cost-effective departure system.

Domestic security officials, who have allocated \$1.7 billion since the 2003 fiscal year to track arrivals and departures, argue that creating the program with the existing technology would be prohibitively expensive.

They say it would require additional employees, new buildings and roads at border crossings, and would probably hamper the vital flow of commerce across those borders.

Congress ordered the creation of such a system in 1996.

In an interview last week, the assistant secretary for homeland security policy, Stewart A. Baker, estimated that an exit system at the land borders would cost “tens of billions of dollars” and said the department had concluded that such a program was not feasible, at least for the time being.

“It is a pretty daunting set of costs, both for the U.S. government and the economy,” Mr. Stewart said. “Congress has said, ‘We want you to do it.’ We are not going to ignore what Congress has said. But the costs here are daunting.

“There are a lot of good ideas and things that would make the country safer. But when you have to sit down and compare all the good ideas people have developed against each other, with a limited budget, you have to make choices that are much harder.”

The news sent alarms to Congress, where some [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#) warned that suspending the monitoring plan would leave the United States vulnerable.

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican who is a departing subcommittee chairman on the House International Relations Committee, said the administration could not say it was protecting domestic security without creating a viable exit monitoring system.

“There will not be border security in this country until we have a knowledge of both entry and exit,” Mr. Rohrabacher said. “We have to make a choice. Do we want to act and control our borders or do we want to have tens of millions of illegals continuing to pour into our country?”

Representative Bennie Thompson, the Mississippi Democrat who is set to lead the Homeland Security Committee, also expressed concern.

“It is imperative that Congress work in partnership with the department to develop a comprehensive border security system that ensures we know who is entering and exiting this country and one that cannot be

defeated by imposters, criminals and terrorists,” Mr. Thompson said in a statement Thursday.

In January 2004, domestic security officials began fingerprint scanning for arriving visitors. The program has screened more than 64 million travelers and prevented more than 1,300 criminals and immigration violators from entering, officials said.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and other officials often call the program a singular achievement in making the country safer. U.S. Visit fingerprints and photographs 2 percent of the people entering the country, because Americans and most Canadians and Mexicans are exempt.

Efforts to determine whether visitors actually leave have faltered. Departure monitoring would help officials hunt for foreigners who have not left, if necessary. Domestic security officials say, however, it would be too expensive to conduct fingerprint or facial recognition scans for land departures. Officials have experimented with less costly technologies, including a system that would monitor by radio data embedded in a travel form carried by foreigners as they depart by foot or in vehicles.

Tests of that technology, Radio Frequency Identification, found a high failure rate. At one border point, the system correctly identified 14 percent of the 166 vehicles carrying the embedded documents, the General Accountability Office reported.

The Congressional investigators noted the “numerous performance and reliability problems” with the technology and said it remained unclear how domestic security officials would be able to meet their legal obligation to create an exit program.

Some immigration analysts said stepping away from the program raised questions again about the commitment to enforce border security and immigration laws.

A senior policy analyst at the Center for Immigration Studies, Jessica Vaughn, said the government had long been too deferential to big businesses and travel groups that raised concerns that exit technology might disrupt travel and trade.

“I worry that the issue of cost is an excuse for not doing anything,” said Ms. Vaughn, whose group advocates curbing immigration. Domestic security officials said they still hoped to find a way to create an exit system at land borders. “We would to do more testing,” a spokesman for the department, Jarrod Agen, said. “We are evaluating the initial tests to determine how to move forward.”

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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-248](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program to collect, maintain, and share data on selected foreign nationals entering and exiting the United States at air, sea and land ports of entry (POEs). These data, including biometric identifiers like digital fingerprints, are to be used to screen persons against watch lists, verify visitors' identities, and record arrival and departure. GAO was asked to review implementation at land POE facilities and in doing so GAO analyzed: (1) efforts to implement US-VISIT entry capability; (2) efforts to implement US-VISIT exit capability; and (3) DHS's efforts to define how US-VISIT fits with other emerging border security initiatives. GAO reviewed DHS and US-VISIT program documents, interviewed program officials, and visited 21 land POEs with varied traffic levels on both borders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS improve existing management controls for US-VISIT; develop performance measures to assess the impact of US-VISIT at land POEs; and ensure that a statutorily mandated report describes how DHS will move to a biometric entry/exit capability and align US-VISIT with emerging land border security initiatives. DHS generally agreed and said that it has begun to or plans to implement GAO's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-248.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Richard Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stanar@gao.gov.

BORDER SECURITY

US-VISIT Program Faces Strategic, Operational, and Technological Challenges at Land Ports of Entry

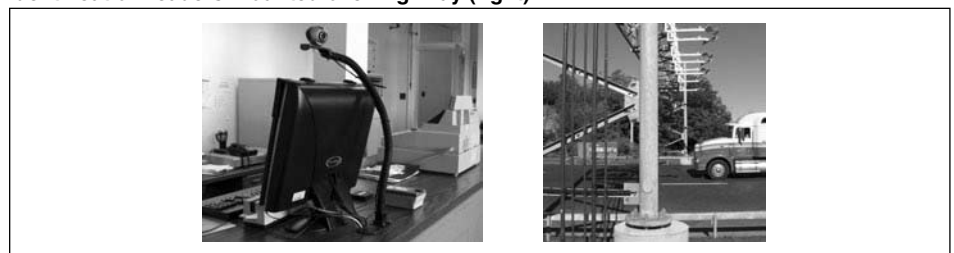
What GAO Found

US-VISIT entry capability has been installed at 154 of the 170 land POEs. Officials at all 21 sites GAO visited reported that US-VISIT had improved their ability to process visitors and verify identities. DHS plans to further enhance US-VISIT's capabilities by, among other things, requiring new technology and equipment for scanning all 10 fingerprints (see photo, left, below). While this may aid border security, installation could increase processing times and adversely affect operations at land POEs where space constraints, traffic congestion, and processing delays already exist. GAO's work indicated that management controls in place to identify such problems and evaluate operations were insufficient and inconsistently administered. For example, GAO identified computer processing problems at 12 sites visited; at 9 of these, the problems were not always reported. US-VISIT has developed performance measures, but measures to gauge factors that uniquely affect land POE operations were not developed; these would put US-VISIT officials in a better position to identify areas for improvement.

US-VISIT officials concluded that, for various reasons, a biometric US-VISIT exit capability cannot now be implemented without incurring a major impact on land POE facilities. An interim nonbiometric exit technology being tested (see photo, right, below) does not meet the statutory requirement for a biometric exit capability and cannot ensure that visitors who enter the country are those who leave. DHS has not yet reported to Congress on a required plan describing how it intends to fully implement a biometric entry/exit program, or use nonbiometric solutions. Until this plan is finalized, neither DHS nor Congress is in a good position to prioritize and allocate program resources or plan for POE facilities modifications.

DHS has not yet articulated how US-VISIT is to align with other emerging land border security initiatives and mandates, and thus cannot ensure that the program will meet strategic program goals and operate cost effectively at land POEs. Knowing how US-VISIT is to work with these initiatives, such as one requiring U.S. citizens, Canadians, and others to present passports or other documents at the border in 2009, is important for understanding the broader strategic context for US-VISIT and identifying resources, tools, and potential facility modifications needed to ensure success.

US-VISIT entry capability set-up with computer and camera (left); nonbiometric exit identification readers mounted over highway (right)



Source: GAO.