

Travel to Canada, Mexico is about to change with new passport rules

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By Roger Yu, USA TODAY

Five years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is on the verge of implementing security-inspired changes to passports that will affect millions of international travelers.

On Jan. 23, air travelers to and from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean will for the first time need a passport to cross the U.S. border. Starting in the spring, all U.S. citizens applying for a passport will get an electronic version that's embedded with a "smart" chip designed to thwart forgery.

The new regulations represent the most significant changes in border control in years, as federal officials try to bring the process of checking identification into the digital age.

Many people heading to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean now travel with just a driver's license for identification. Under the new rule, U.S. citizens traveling by air need a passport. Though a driver's license will no longer suffice, the government does leave some wiggle room. The Nexus Air card, issued under a USA-Canada cooperative program to prescreened travelers, is acceptable. The passport rule will apply to land and sea travelers no later than June 1, 2009.

For Americans who don't want to pay \$97 for a passport, the State Department also plans by the end of 2007 to introduce a "passport card" that would work like a passport. The card, which costs \$20 for adults, is good only for those traveling by land or sea to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

The State Department issued 16 million passports in 2006, vs. 12 million in 2005, with the increase largely the result of the new rule. It's now issuing the "e-passport" in some areas of the country. Conversion from the old passport will be complete this spring.

The new passport looks like the traditional type, but its smart chip stores the traveler's photo and personal information. If the chip is broken or malfunctions, the holder can continue to use the document as a non-electronic passport or buy a new one. Traditional passports will remain valid until they expire.

Critics say that transmitting information wirelessly can compromise security, and important data could fall into the wrong hands. With proper equipment, someone could remotely intercept personal data, a practice called "skimming."

Ann Barrett, a top passport official at the State Department, says the department has responded by adding metallic anti-skimming material to the passport's cover. Other protections include encrypting the information.

Marc Rotenberg of the Electronic Privacy Information Center says the State Department should be given credit for responding to privacy concerns. But he says it still needs to add safeguards to the passport card.

Caleb Tiller, a spokesman for the National Business Travel Association, says the organization is satisfied with the changes. "The thing we were concerned about was balancing security and allowing free commerce and business travel," Tiller says. "As far as we can tell, they're striking that balance."

People applying for passports at the federal agencies in Denver, Boston, Washington and Miami now get the new e-passport. Those applying at 13 other agencies may still receive the traditional passport until this spring, when agencies will start issuing only the e-passport.