

## Pointing fingers over fingerprinting

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By Samuel Loewenberg

A proposal released Tuesday by the Department of Homeland Security to require airlines to fingerprint departing foreigners has drawn the ire of the industry, which is lobbying hard to overturn it.

Homeland Security put the cost to airlines at \$2.7 billion over 10 years. And the airlines, complaining about the price tag, say the proposed rule would lead to substantial delays at already jammed airports.

The burden of tracking the exits of some 33 million foreigners should be borne by the government, not by private industry, said Ken Dunlap, who handles security issues at the International Air Transport Association, which represents 240 domestic and international carriers.

Homeland Security officials, though, say that since the airlines are already responsible for collecting biometric information on departing passengers, they should also collect fingerprints.

The proposed rule implements a congressional mandate aimed at better security and immigration control.

The brewing lobbying war between Homeland Security and the financially pressed airlines has gotten a third group, the travel industry, in a tizzy as well. Its advocates say the fight is indicative of a systemic breakdown in air travel that is hurting the entire economy.

**"What we see here is a classic stalemate" between the airlines and the government, said [Travel Industry Association](#) President [Roger Dow](#). "They are both standing there, pointing their fingers at each other. We're saying to them, 'There is a date that this needs to get done by. So, folks, let's break the stalemate and get it figured out.'"**

The airlines are taking their complaints about the fingerprint proposal to Congress, arguing to the homeland security committees that the department's plan should be scrapped because it would put even more pressure on already overburdened airports.

"There are going to be a lot of people standing in lines that the U.S. government created because of bad policy," Dunlap warned.

"We're aggressively going to tell the story of how this proposal is going to negatively affect air travel, our customers and our airports," he added. "This is just poor, poor government."

Homeland Security spokeswoman Amy Kudwa said the airlines should run the new fingerprint program because they already transmit lists of departing international passengers to the department for review. "This is one additional data point," she said.

Kudwa emphasized that the proposal is now open for comment from the airlines and that it does not specify where the fingerprint data will actually be collected.

"We expect airlines to be more creative than we would be as government officials" in determining the smoothest way to implement the rule, she said.

Another logistical issue is presented in the way American airports are set up. Since many airports don't have a separate international terminal, officials have determined that the best way to monitor travelers leaving the country is to have the airlines do it, probably at check-in or at the gate.

"We're dealing here with a series of imperfect options. The question is, which bad option is the most effective?" said Stewart Verdery, a former assistant secretary for policy at Homeland Security who is now lobbying on the issue for the travel industry and a fingerprint technology company.

Meanwhile, airline lobbyists have been pressing their case with the White House Office of Management and Budget, which has been reviewing the proposed new regulations. The proposal will be open for public comment over the next several months.

Currently, Homeland Security fingerprints foreign travelers who are entering the U.S. but does not track the prints when they exit.

The airlines argue that they will face unfair burdens, including the need to train an estimated 75,000 employees, overhaul their computer systems to accommodate the large file sizes of the fingerprint scans and purchase costly fingerprint-reading equipment.

While Homeland Security officials say that the scanning process will take only a few seconds, the airlines argue it will take at least a full minute. And with dozens of passengers waiting to board each plane, that will lead to substantial delays.

So far, the airlines have earned the support of House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-Miss.) and Border, Maritime and Global Counterterrorism Subcommittee Chairwoman Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.). The two recently wrote Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to urge him to place the onus of the exit visa program on the government, saying that the current proposal is "troubling."

The issue is reverberating beyond the airlines. The tourism industry is concerned that if the issue is not resolved, it could keep tourists from entering the United States. It will also trigger a provision in last year's Sept. 11 legislation to stop the expansion of the so-called visa waiver program, which allows citizens from foreign countries to visit the United States without a visa.

Countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Taiwan could be blocked from joining the program, which the industry says will cost it millions of dollars in lost revenue from car rentals, hotel stays and amusement park visits.

But with all of the recent turmoil in the airline industry, finger-pointing appears to be the order of the day. At a hearing last week on airline oversight problems, the Federal Aviation Administration's acting administrator, Robert Sturgell, said that the responsibility for monitoring safety ultimately lies with the airlines themselves.

"I do not want the FAA to be the quality control unit for each airline," Sturgell told a Senate Appropriations subcommittee.

Frequent delays and the maintenance issues that led to the grounding of hundreds of planes are already taking their toll on the travel industry.

**Dow cites figures that 30 percent of business passengers are putting off or canceling at least one trip a year because air travel is now such a hassle. At fault, he said, is the system of governmental oversight, air industry cost cutting and rising fuel prices.**

**"This is not an airline issue; it is a system issue," Dow said. "Our members, who represent everybody in the airline industry, are mad as hell."**

**The mounting problems with air travel are feeding into the economic downturn, and as people travel less, it affects tourism and, therefore, the overall economy, he said.**

"I do believe that because of the negative media attention that the airlines have received over the last couple of months, it sends a signal to someone who is planning a trip to Orlando, and maybe they'll postpone it," said Gary Sain, president and chief executive officer of the Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau in Florida.

The **Travel Industry Association** is trying to get the presidential candidates to take up the issue. In a letter sent last week, Dow urged the candidates to consider air travel problems as part of their national platforms.

So far, only the campaign of Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has expressed interest, according to the association. Neither of the Democratic campaigns, of New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton or Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, has yet responded.

In a statement, Dow reminded the candidates that unhappy travelers could affect them, as well.

"Travelers are voters - and approximately 2 million take to the skies each day," he said.