

## **BORDER TRACKING SYSTEM WILL BE PARTIALLY OPERATIONAL BY YEAR'S END**

By Shane Harris, Daily Briefing  
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One of the Bush administration's most ambitious and complicated homeland security initiatives—the tracking of about 35 million foreign visitors as they enter and exit the United States annually—will be partially operational by the end of the year, Homeland Security Department officials said Tuesday.

The US VISIT program, unveiled by Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge in April, will begin operations at all airports and seaports by Dec. 31, but on a limited scale. Rather than build a new electronic system to track visitors using their fingerprints and photographs, the department will use existing government systems as a stopgap to meet a congressional mandate to collect and store identification information by the end of 2003.

The department plans to collect two fingerprints and a photograph from every visitor and enter those records into a system used by federal law enforcement and border control agencies to track suspicious individuals entering the country, according to a spokeswoman for Homeland Security's Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The system, known as the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS), also can be used to access the FBI's records on wanted criminals. The Customs Service managed IBIS before the agency was merged into the Homeland Security Department.

Visitors' fingerprints and photographs will be collected using a computer system once run by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Then they will be transmitted to another electronic record-keeping system that matches names of arriving and departing passengers reported by airlines. The names of students entering the country also will be sent to a Homeland Security system designed to monitor their activities while attending U.S. schools.

Homeland Security officials laid out their strategy for implementing the US VISIT system to technology companies at a government-sponsored "industry day" held outside Washington Tuesday. Asa Hutchinson, the Homeland Security undersecretary for border and transportation security, as well as other officials, pledged to do a better job keeping companies up to date on how the project is proceeding. Industry executives have been frustrated that the department still hasn't released a request for proposals to build US VISIT, even though the mandate for an entry-exit tracking system has been in place for more than a year.

Homeland Security now plans to issue a proposals request by November 2004 and will make an award by May 2005. According to industry sources, some of the largest and

most experienced federal contractors, many of which have track records with other border and immigration programs, are being eyed as the most promising competitors.

Presumed in the lead are Lockheed Martin, which manages a fingerprint identification system shared by the FBI and the former Immigration and Naturalization Service, as well as technology titans Northrop Grumman and Computer Sciences Corp., which in April won a contract to supply technology services under a contract also once under the INS' purview. The INS is now part of Homeland Security.

Congress has appropriated \$380 million for US VISIT this fiscal year, but the system could cost billions. As Homeland Security struggles to get a much smaller student tracking system off the ground, some have questioned whether US VISIT's rocky start portends badly for future security initiatives.

Even though the government is hunting for a major contractor to take the lead on the project, smaller technology companies, particularly biometrics equipment makers, are key to the project's success. Those companies are moving quickly to partner with the bigger firms they think have the best chance of winning.

An executive with one small firm who attended the industry event Tuesday said large contractors and the government are "holding their cards" as each side waits to see what the other can offer. On the one hand, federal officials want industry to offer up potential solutions for how to build the massive tracking system by the end of 2005, when it must be fully operational at all airports, seaports and land border crossings, said Rick Carter, director of homeland security for Imaging Automation, a Bedford, N.H., firm that makes document authentication and identity verification technologies.

But large companies want to hear from the government on how they plan to keep the project on track, Carter said. The result has been something of a "Catch-22," he said, with smaller firms in the middle trying to offer up their own solutions for the daunting task at hand.