

April 4, 2008 - Rep. Slaughter Delivers Remarks At Annual Binational Tourism Summit

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Slaughter Delivers Remarks At Annual Binational Tourism Summit

Speaks on the Importance of Keeping the U.S. & Canadian Border

Open for Business

BUFFALO, NY & Congresswoman Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Chairwoman of the House Committee on Rules, today delivered remarks at the annual Binational Tourism Summit in Buffalo, New York. Rep. Slaughter offered her perspective on the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) and the importance of an open U.S.-Canadian border.

Rep. Slaughter's speech comes a week after the U.S. Department of

Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Department of State (DOS) announced their final rule for the land and sea portion of WHTI. The final rule requires travelers to present a passport or other approved secure document denoting citizenship and identity for all land and sea travel into the United States. These document requirements will be effective June 1, 2009.

In December, Rep. Slaughter successfully included legislation in the FY 2008 Omnibus Appropriations bill that delayed the implementation of WHTI from January 2008 until June 2009. The legislation also included language withholding funds from the Department of Homeland Security until the Department reports on the feasibility of WHTI to Congress.

"It is imperative that all federal border policies recognize that the U.S.-Canada border is a vital channel for travel and commerce, and that both countries are each other's largest trade and tourism partners," said Rep. Slaughter. "More than a relationship of shared proximity and principles, the Northern border represents a major component of our global economy."

"I agree with the intent of WHTI," Slaughter continued. "We must be confident that the documents individuals present for entry into the United States are secure and authentic. However, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to our border concerns. We cannot simply flip a switch and hastily move from having the world's largest open-border to requiring expensive new crossing documentation."

"For this reason, I introduced bipartisan legislation last year that establishes a responsible path for implementing WHTI effectively," Slaughter concluded. "However, despite my efforts, DHS has continued to move forward with their misguided priorities by ending the acceptance of oral declarations when entering the United States on January 31, 2008."

The Binational Tourism Summit is hosted by the Binational Tourism Alliance, a not-for-profit group whose goal is to eliminate the barriers to cross-border tourism development in binational Canadian/U.S. regions.

BACKGROUND

For over three years, the Department of Homeland Security and Department of State have been moving forward with an ill-advised plan, known as the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, which will require all travelers returning from Canada to carry a passport or yet-to-be defined alternative document as soon as the summer of 2008. To many, this plan has the potential to freeze cross-border

traffic in Western New York while doing little to improve overall security.

As a result, Congresswoman Slaughter introduced bipartisan legislation with her colleague Rep. John McHugh that sets out a responsible path for implementing WHTI effectively. Called the Protecting American Commerce and Travel Act (PACT Act), the bill serves as a blueprint for properly implementing WHTI. The PACT Act has been endorsed by 100 groups in the greater Niagara region and every major travel and trade association in the United States and Canada.

The PACT Act requires DHS to develop low-cost alternatives to a passport and test the concept of an enhanced driver's licenses prior to the implementation of WHTI. Rep. Slaughter believes that travelers should not have to purchase new documents if a driver's license can suffice instead.

In June, Rep. Slaughter worked closely with House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman, David Price, to include key provisions of her PACT ACT in the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act for FY 2008. These provisions were included in the FY 2008 Omnibus Appropriations bill which was signed into law on December 26, 2007.

Specifically, the language authored by Rep. Slaughter states that DHS is not implementing WHTI in a coherent fashion, or one that is transparent to the traveling public.

DHS requested \$252 million in FY08 and FY09 for implementation of WHTI. Rep. Slaughter's language stipulates that DHS cannot have access to \$100 million of that total until it transmits a report to Congress containing: "[t]he results of pilot programs used to develop and implement the plan required by Section 7209 of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (bill that mandated WHTI)..."

Furthermore, the report must include:

- infrastructure and staffing required, with associated costs by port of entry;

- updated milestones for plan implementation;

- detailed explanation of how such section 7209 have been satisfied;

- confirmation that a vicinity read radio frequency technology identification card has been;

- adequately tested to ensure operational success;

- a description of steps taken to ensure the integrity of privacy safeguard.

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