

Tight border raises concerns for businesses

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The Associated Press
October 11, 2007

NEWPORT -- Stiffer identification requirements for people entering the United States from Canada are hurting Vermont businesses, and the fallout is likely to become worse if Department of Homeland Security plans are implemented as scheduled, a U.S. Senate panel was told Wednesday.

At a field hearing of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Jay Peak ski resort president Bill Stenger told Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., that Montreal radio stations sometimes report the time it takes to cross the border, which can discourage travel and hurt U.S. businesses.

"There is damage being done right now," Stenger told Leahy, who held a formal committee field hearing in Newport, along the southern shore of Lake Memphremagog.

About half of Jay Peak's ski business comes from Canadians, and they are accustomed to being able to cross the border with a minimum of formalities or delays, he said.

"This vibrancy can be lost in a very short time if crossing into Vermont becomes expensive, unpredictable, time-consuming and an unfriendly process," Stenger said.

"If they are blocked at the border with inefficient crossing restrictions and technology that is untested in (a) winter environment, those Canadians will stay home, where they can get swift access to their resorts," he said.

Under current Department of Homeland Security plans, travelers entering the United States by land from Canada and Mexico will be required to use passports or other, still-to-be-designed travel documents beginning in the summer.

Leahy has proposed delaying until mid-2009 the requirement that all people entering the United States have a passport or other travel document, but the Department of Homeland Security is sticking with its mid-2008 timetable.

Leahy said Wednesday that those plans would damage the economy of Vermont and other border states -- without improving U.S. security.

Last month, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Gov. Jim Douglas signed an agreement that would allow Vermont to develop an enhanced driver's license to be used instead of a passport at border crossings.

"I am afraid that this administration's current policies threaten to fray the social fabric of countless communities that straddle the border," Leahy said.

Stenger and others said homeland security was a legitimate concern, but said it has to be achieved without devastating the economy.

Bruce Hyde, Vermont Travel and Tourism commissioner, said Canadians make up

about two-thirds of out-of-state day visits to Vermont, and that they spend about \$350,000 per day altogether. He said fewer than 40 percent of Canadians have passports.

"This is a significant expense for many families and most certainly is a deciding factor when Canadians plan a vacation or trip," Hyde said.

Stenger and others at Wednesday's hearing said no effort was being made to work with Canadian officials so similar, nonpassport documents could be used by Canadian citizens.

"DHS thinks exclusively about security and I respect that, but someone needs to go beyond just security and recognize that the lives and livelihood of tens of thousands of Americans will be sharply and negatively impacted if the economic well-being of the border communities is not taken into consideration," Stenger said. "We can't afford to miss getting this right the first time."

Leahy said the testimony he took at the hearing will be used to help shape the debate about Canadian border issues in Congress.