

Leahy holds hearing on border issues

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Charlotte Albright - Newport, Vt. (Host)

The Department of Homeland Security says it's trying to make borders more secure with its "Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative". But to many Vermonters and Canadians, the new law stands for daily headaches and long-term worries.

Today in Newport, Senator Patrick Leahy chaired a Judiciary Committee hearing on the issue, and VPR's Charlotte Albright was there.

(Albright) About forty people and a half dozen panelists spent most of the morning in a hearing room overlooking Lake Memphremagog, with a stunning view of Canada.

But many complained that it's getting harder and harder to get there from here, and here from there.

Senator Leahy called new travel restrictions a fiasco in the making, and then asked for testimony from state leaders in tourism, international trade, and local economic development. They complained about long checkpoint lines, harsh questioning, and a new passport requirement due to kick in next year.

Bill Stenger, President of Jay Peak ski area, worries about losing hundreds of Canadian customers, especially since only 35 per cent of Canadians have passports now.

(Stenger) "Senator Leahy, my fellow Vermonters and I cannot afford the state department and the department of homeland security to misjudge the impending policy changes and what will be required to implement them. They and we will not get a second chance. We will be fatally harmed economically if the new protocol is not right the first time."

(Albright) According to the state tourism department, Canadians make two thirds of Vermont's out-of-state day visits, and in 2005 each of those tourists spent about 65 dollars a day here. That adds up to almost 2 million dollars a year in day-tripping alone. But tourism officials worry that those numbers may take a dive, despite the strong loony. Patricia Sears, Executive Director of the Newport City Renaissance said the timing of the new border restrictions could not be worse:

(Sears) "We enjoy a robust relationship with potential partnerships that would push and pull international trade and tourism. These partnerships are at risk, at risk of enduring a chilling effect because of border delays and hostility by border guards."

(Albright) Panelists agreed that protecting America from terrorists is a top priority, but noted that Canadians make up only point seven of one percent of illegal aliens in the United States.

When Senator Leahy asked panelists what they would do to improve security, they suggested more cooperation with Canadian intelligence agencies and a driver's license that shows citizenship and identity with a single swipe of a card. They noted, however, that Canadians would not benefit from that improvement.

They also begged Leahy to use his influence to slow down implementation of the law, and to look at the European Union as a more workable model for ease of travel between nations.

For VPR News, I'm Charlotte Albright.

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