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U.S. Border ID Plan Worries Tourism Industry

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NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. — The U.S. plan to require people traveling between the United States and Canada to have passports or similar identification is already hurting cross-border tourism, and it's not even in effect yet, tourism officials say.

Convention planners are hesitant to book events across the border a year or two in advance without knowing how the plan will be implemented or what new identification cards will cost, Randy Williams of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada told a panel of U.S. and Canadian government officials on Monday.

Many Americans are staying away from Canada already, believing the requirement is in effect now, he said.

"There is uncertainty in the marketplace and uncertainty is killing us right now," Williams said at a conference of the Binational Tourism Alliance, a trade organization that promotes cross-border tourism.

Others worried potential tourists would find it too bothersome and costly to apply for cards for themselves and their children, and to have to carry extra documents with them.

Americans now must show at least driver's license (and proof of citizenship) or birth certificate when re-entering the country at land borders. Beginning Jan. 1, 2008, they will need either a passport or other form of identification now being developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and State Department.

Air and sea travelers will have to show the new identification a year earlier under the plan announced by the United States in April as part of post-Sept. 11 security efforts.

Canadians, meanwhile, will have to show a passport to enter the United States.

Ontario Tourism Minister Jim Bradley predicted U.S. winter destinations such as Myrtle Beach and Florida will lose Canadian "snowbirds" and the money they spend.

In 2003, there were 34.5 million visits by Canadians to the U.S. Bradley said he favored upgrading existing forms of identification, like the driver's license, with new security features and a citizenship designation.

"That would achieve greater security while allowing us all to cross the border on the informal basis we have enjoyed throughout our history," he said.

Tamara Conway, a Department of Homeland Security policy adviser, said the government was working to lower the potential cost of the passport alternative. U.S. passports are \$97, while officials have indicated a wallet-sized card would cost about half that.