

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson****“The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative:
Perspectives of a Community on the U.S.-
Canada Border”**

July 21, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee field hearing in Buffalo, New York entitled “The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative: Perspectives of a Community on the U.S.-Canada Border”:

“I would like to thank my friend and colleague, Rep. Louise Slaughter, for urging the Committee to hold this morning’s field hearing and for her leadership on the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) in Congress. She knows the importance of this issue to Western New York firsthand, and has been an excellent advocate on your behalf.

Today, we will hear from several local stakeholders about the potential detrimental effects of WHTI on Buffalo and other communities along America’s northern border. We will also hear testimony about the importance of WHTI to our nation’s security, and learn more about the Administration’s plan to implement the requirements at land and sea ports.

Like many of my colleagues and most Americans, I strongly support the goals of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, which was mandated in response to a recommendation of the 9/11 Commission. At the same time, I am very concerned about the troubled implementation of WHTI to date.

In January, the WHTI rule for air travelers took effect, requiring every person arriving in the U.S. to present a passport. As Americans rushed to get passports to comply with the new rule, the surge in demand overwhelmed the State Department’s capacity to issue passports, creating an unprecedented backlog.

These problems underscore the potential consequences for travel, tourism, and commerce when Americans are required to have documents that our government cannot make available in a timely manner. As we move toward implementation of WHTI at our land borders, where disruptions to commerce and tourism could inflict significant damage to the economies on both sides of the border, we need to make certain that these mistakes are not repeated.

It is my hope that today’s hearing will help ensure that the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative is implemented, and implemented right.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Please contact Dena Graziano or Todd Levett at (202) 225-9978

