

Statement of Ranking Member Filemon Vela (D-TX)

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

“Combating Terrorist Travel: Does the Visa Waiver Program Keep Our Nation Safe?”

March 17, 2015

Thank you for holding today's hearing regarding the security of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

As Chairman Miller and I both represent border districts with maritime interests, albeit on different borders, I believe we have many areas of mutual interest and concern to address in our work.

Today, we are focusing on a border security issue of a different kind than what we are used to discussing - the security of a program that facilitates the travel of millions of visitors to this country each year, the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

In fact, with 38 countries currently participating in the program, about 40 percent of all overseas visitors enter the U.S. without a visa pursuant to the VWP.

Unfortunately, there is growing concern that the VWP could be exploited by terrorists, and particularly those holding western passports, who could attempt to travel to this country under program.

With direction and support from Congress, in recent years DHS has worked to strengthen the security of the VWP, through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) and its other pre-departure passenger screening programs.

These program complement and are supported by information-sharing agreements with VWP partners that provide DHS with data to vet travelers more effectively.

Still, with thousands of foreign fighters traveling to and from Syria, some of whom hold western passports, concerns about the security of the VWP are not entirely unfounded.

I hope our witnesses can share with us their perspectives on whether the VWP is secure, or if Congress and DHS need to do more to shore up this important program.

As a Member representing a border district, I am keenly aware of the importance of international travel and trade to our Nation and its economy.

I believe I join many of my colleagues in the hope that we can find a way to ensure the security of the VWP while continuing to welcome visitors under the program to the United States.