DHS Proposes Adding Mandatory Social Media Information to ESTA Process

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has announced that it plans to add mandatory social media collection to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) process.

ESTA is an automated online system that makes an initial determination about a visitor's eligibility to travel to the United States under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). The VWP allows individuals from 40 countries to enter the United States for tourism or business visitor purposes for up to 90 days without a visa.

ESTA authorization, like a visa, does not determine whether a traveler is admissible to the United States. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers make that determination at the port of entry. The ESTA online system collects biographical information and answers to VWP eligibility questions.

In 2019, the Department of State updated its immigrant and nonimmigrant visa application forms to request additional information, including social media identifiers, to enhance screening of noncitizens for potential risks to national security. DHS is proposing to make the provision of this information a mandatory part of the ESTA process, as well. ESTA applicants are already required to provide certain contact information, travel history, and family member information.

CBP also plans to begin collecting biometric data to confirm identity on ESTA applications. A "liveness" test will be required. Applicants will have to provide a selfie or other live photo and scan in passport information for comparison. For convenience, CBP plans to make this function available on a mobile application for mobile phones and tablets, but applicants will still be able to submit their applications on the ESTA website.

The current ESTA fee is $14.00 and DHS does not plan to raise that fee (at this time).

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