Electronic Passports May Make Americans Targets

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A State Department plan to introduce electronic passports this summer has raised concern among a number of observers that, in an attempt to help protect Americans at home, the government could put U.S. travelers abroad at risk from terrorists and thieves.

Some privacy advocates and travel groups charge that a remotely readable chip in the passports, which the State Department intends to begin issuing after a roll-out to government employees in August, could be scanned by criminals or terrorists out to target Americans.

Under current plans, the chip, called a radio-frequency ID or RFID chip, will contain the same identifying information as is printed in the passport--name, passport number, birthday, and place of birth. The data will be unencrypted, and will also include a digital picture for use with facial recognition technology.

The read-only, digitally signed chip is meant to prevent forged passports and improve U.S. border security. It would be examined by border officials using electronic readers tuned to the chip's radio frequency.

he RFID chip doesn't actively broadcast, but, with the right equipment, it can be read from a distance, although just how far is under dispute. The State Department and the technical specification for the chip say that the data can be read only within four inches, but critics contend the signal can be detected from as far away as 60 feet. Terrorists and criminals could take advantage of the electronic passports to target Americans.

To prevent the potential threat against American travelers, the State Department says it plans to include material in the passport cover that will block the signal from the RFID chip. The shielding cover would mean the chip could be read only when the passport is open. "Stitching a metal web into the cover creates a Faraday cage," says V.C. Kumar, manager for emerging markets at TI. "It kills the RFID signal."

Some Americans concerned about the potential risks of electronic passports are obtaining or renewing regular paper-and-ink passports before the new electronic ones are issued. The State Department does not plan to force people to switch to electronic passports before their old ones expire, but that American travelers might face electronic passport requirements from other countries before their low-tech passport becomes invalid.

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