

Public Comment on Agency Information Collection Activities; Revision; Arrival and Departure Record (Form I-94) and Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA)

OMB Control Number: 1651-0111

U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Dear Seth Renkema:

On behalf of SPIE, the international society for optics and photonics, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed revisions to the information collections associated with the Arrival and Departure Record (Form I-94) and the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). I recognize the Department of Homeland Security's interest in enhancing national security and improving the integrity of border control processes.

However, we write to express **significant concern about the scope and potential unintended consequences of the proposed data collection requirements**, particularly the mandatory collection of extensive personal information — including social media account identifiers, extensive contact history, and biometric data — for travelers seeking authorization under the Visa Waiver Program and related entry procedures.

1. Impact on Global Optics and Photonics Commerce and Technological Advancement

Optics and photonics is a global industry with diverse and specialized photonic components - lasers, detectors, modulations, transducers, imagers, waveguides, and more – gathered from around the world to enable \$20T of worldwide goods and services. International trade shows facilitate the development of these supply chains that are crucial to progress in fields such as semiconductors, quantum, communications, and defense. Business is routinely conducted at US photonics trade shows and exhibitions that provide opportunities for US manufacturers to engage with global customers.

In addition, travel for scientific, technical, and academic collaboration is essential to U.S. leadership in research and innovation. International attendance at conferences, workshops, and professional gatherings contributes directly to the exchange of ideas, commercialization of research, and cross-border partnerships that benefit U.S. competitiveness and economic growth. Scholars and technical experts routinely travel to the United States from countries worldwide for short-term engagements that are crucial to progress in fields such as medicine, engineering, quantum, and information technology.

The proposed expansion of the ESTA data collection, which would require applicants to provide five years of social media account information and additional high-value personal data, introduces **substantial privacy concerns and added administrative burden** that

are likely to *discourage* many would-be customers and visitors from attending U.S. trade shows and scientific events. Given the highly competitive global nature of academic and technical gatherings, *even modest barriers to travel can cause scientists and engineers to choose alternative conference and trade show venues outside the US*, thereby diminishing U.S. influence and footprint in key domains of commerce, knowledge and innovation.

2. Disproportionate Burden Relative to Stated Purpose

The Federal Register notice invites comments on whether the proposed information collection is necessary for proper agency functions and whether the burden estimates accurately reflect respondents' experiences.

While national security is a legitimate objective, the **scope of required data (including social media histories, extended contact histories, and biometric identifiers)** appears disproportionate to the risks posed by short-term visitors attending scientific or technical events.

Furthermore, the considerable time and resource commitment required to assemble and disclose this information could create a meaningful deterrent.

3. Recommendations to Minimize Burden and Protect Global Engagement

To address these concerns and align the collection more closely with the dual goals of security and international engagement, we respectfully recommend the following:

a. Narrow Data Requirements for Low-Risk Travel Categories

Should CBP find it necessary to move forward with additional data collection, we recommend limiting or exempting mandatory additional information, such as social media identifiers or biometric fields, for travelers whose purpose is short-term scientific, technical, or academic engagement. An exemption or reduced data set for these categories would be justified as they historically have posed low security risk but high value to U.S. research and innovation ecosystems.

b. Provide Clear Justification and Transparency

CBP should articulate, with specific evidence, how each additional data element improves risk assessment or contributes to security objectives. Clarity on how collected data will be used, stored, and protected would also help alleviate privacy concerns.

c. Reduce Administrative Burden and Complexity

Where feasible, streamline collection processes to minimize time and effort required from

applicants. For example, allow optional rather than mandatory disclosure of certain data elements.

d. Impact Assessment on Travel and Research

Should CBP move forward with changes, we recommend CBP assess and disclose the impacts of the expanded data collection on international travel patterns, particularly for scientific conferences and technical exchanges, for which data from academic societies and professional organizations could provide useful insights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the intent to modernize entry and exit information collection is understandable, the **breadth of the proposed requirements risks creating an inadvertent deterrent to global participation in U.S. scientific, technical, and trade events**. Given the profound value of international collaboration to U.S. competitiveness, we urge DHS and CBP to at a minimum refine this information collection request to ensure that it does not place undue burden on travelers whose engagements contribute significantly to the nation's research, innovation, academic, and commercial leadership.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Rochford". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kent Rochford
CEO, SPIE