

Biometric Identifiers Can Prove to Be Vital to Our Nation's Maritime Security

One of the greatest threats to the safety and security of the American people is the penetration of our vast maritime borders by those who wish to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States. Every year countless illegal migrants gain entry to the United States through our maritime borders. Among those who are caught, many are suspected to be repeat immigration violators, violent criminals, smugglers and possibly even terrorists. The problem is that we just don't know for sure who these people are.

As it currently stands, most interdicted migrants simply bounce off of existing DHS maritime protection efforts. This is largely because the necessary infrastructure is not in place to absorb and collect crucial biometric identifiers that could effectively track and prosecute individuals who are immigration violators, wanted criminals or known threats to U.S. interests. The technology and appropriate processes do exist to conduct the kind of mobile biometric collection needed to blanket our maritime borders. The U.S. Coast Guard currently uses mobile biometric units that capture an illegal migrant's biometric information. The problem is that this is not fully deployed throughout the DHS administered maritime border system.

Since starting its efforts in November 2006, the Coast Guard has interdicted more than 21 vessels containing almost 600 undocumented aliens. Approximately 22 percent of those interdicted were enrolled in US-VISIT as prior felons or immigration violators. Just on the basis of these results alone, the collection of biometric identifiers in a maritime environment can be a critical tool to help interdict, identify and deter illegal waterborne migrants.

That is why I have introduced legislation, H.R. 2490, which would authorize DHS to conduct a pilot program for mobile biometric identification in the maritime environment of aliens unlawfully attempting to enter the United States. H.R. 2490 would help put a stop to a recurring cycle of immigrants simply being caught and released with little or no information as to their actual identity; only for them to attempt illegal entry again, and again and again. By empowering our maritime border officials with the necessary tools to collect this critical biometric information, we can improve their ability to stop repeat immigration offenders, arrest known criminals and smugglers and thwart potential terrorists.

Of the biometric technologies so far deployed or tested by border security agencies, fingerprints and face recognition are the most commonly used, and iris scans are widely viewed as promising for future applications. Ideally, as this pilot moves forward, the biometric collection process and technology would innovate and expand. The security industry can play a pivotal role in this process.

To this point, H.R. 2490 authorizes \$10 million for the pilot program, much of which likely will be used to help overcome technology hurdles that currently prevent the timely transmission of electronic information between Coast Guard cutters and various government databases. Congress has a vital duty to provide for the protection of the people of the United States.

We know that our maritime borders are vulnerable because we cannot accurately verify or screen those we catch trying to illegally penetrate it. My bill will help provide additional tools and resources to strengthen maritime immigration enforcement and begin to plug leaks which threaten to crack our homeland defenses.

It is now up to Congress to act.