

EBTC NEWS

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SUBJECT: Peace Bridge pre-inspections reveal outdated Customs effort

SOURCE: Jerry Zmenski, News Washington Bureau Chief, The Buffalo News, 2/5/15

Pre-inspection project shows inefficiencies slow truck traffic

WASHINGTON – An 11-month experiment in clearing some U.S.-bound cargo on the Canadian side of the Peace Bridge has ended with an unexpected lesson: that U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s outdated ways and outdated technology are contributing to mammoth backups for trucks entering the U.S.

The pilot project was a test to see if it would be more efficient to move the processing of U.S.-bound cargo to the Canadian side of the Peace Bridge, a move that advocates such as Sen. Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., say is essential to ending bridge backups.

Sources with intimate knowledge of how the pilot project proceeded said it worked very well and likely could be implemented broadly if the U.S. and Canadian governments strike an agreement for doing so.

More immediately, though, sources said the pilot project revealed that U.S. Customs and Border Protection has, by sticking to its old ways, made the bridge backups even worse.

For example, the study showed:

- Pre-inspection of U.S.-bound trucks at the pilot project booths in Fort Erie proceeded more quickly partly because higher-speed Internet was installed in the Canadian booths, compared to what’s on the U.S. side.
- Similarly, more-modern radiation detection technology was installed at the pilot project booths on the Canadian side, meaning there were fewer false positives and therefore fewer delays.

- Empty trucks entering the U.S. require more inspection than trucks with cargo. Full trucks must complete a manifest an hour before entering the U.S., which speeds up the inspection process, but empty trucks are not required to complete a manifest, which means they must be more thoroughly inspected at the border.
- The trucks at the pilot project booths in Fort Erie operated more efficiently because they did not accept cash payment for the various border fees that truckers have to pay, instead relying on prepayment, while the booths in Buffalo still collected cash.
- Lastly, some of the delays on the Buffalo side of the Peace Bridge could be alleviated if the X-ray facility there – which is located immediately in front of the truck inspection booths – were to be moved so that trucks that need to be X-rayed don't delay all those other trucks trying to enter the U.S.

Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat and longtime supporter of the pre-inspection effort, was aghast that the pilot project revealed such an outdated Customs effort.

“We should make sure our borders are equipped with the highest and best technology, and obviously we are not,” Higgins said. “There is no excuse for why Customs and Border Protection should not work to keep our border crossing as efficient as possible.”

In response to the findings, Higgins dashed off a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, asking that the agency address the issues the pilot project revealed. In addition, Higgins – a member of the House Homeland Security Committee – said he will try to get the committee to hold a hearing on the matter.

Rep. Chris Collins, R-Clarence, said the pilot project's results indicated that Customs and Border Protection should adopt some of the “Lean Six Sigma” efficiency techniques that he advocated both as a businessman and as Erie County executive.

Noting that most of the problems revealed in the pilot project would be simple and inexpensive to correct, Collins said: “These are very basic things that I put in the ‘just do it’ category.”

Fixing those outdated processes and procedures may well prove to be easier than fully implementing border preclearance at the Peace Bridge, a proposal that still requires an international agreement between the United States and Canada.

But both Higgins and Schumer – the leading force behind the preclearance pilot project – said the accidental findings about outdated Customs technology pale in comparison to the ultimate solution to backups at the Peace Bridge: moving all the processing for U.S.-bound trucks to the much larger and less congested plaza in Fort Erie.

“Look, certainly there are changes that can be made without preclearance; they're necessary, but they are not sufficient,” said Schumer, D-N.Y. “You're still going to have big backups” unless truck processing is moved to the Canadian side, he added.

Ron Rienas, general manager of the Peace Bridge Authority, agreed that that move would be the best solution to permanently alleviating truck backups.

“We don’t have any space to expand or reconfigure the American plaza” in a way that would greatly improve the truck traffic flow into the U.S., he said.

The pilot project was a baby version of the idea of moving all processing of U.S.-bound trucks to the Canadian side of the Peace Bridge. Two inspection booths in Fort Erie were staffed by American Customs officials who processed trucks about to cross the bridge from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, while other trucks continued to cross the bridge and be inspected in Buffalo.

Still, that experiment – and a similar one at the border between Blaine, Wash., and Surrey, B.C. – ended in success, said sources familiar with the dual pilot projects.

“Preliminary results indicate that pre-inspection operations at the Peace Bridge successfully reduced the time required to process commercial trucks,” said Lisa Filipps, spokesperson for Public Safety Canada, the Canadian border security agency.

The U.S. and Canadian governments are currently analyzing the results of the pilot project more closely and expect to issue a joint report by July 31, Filipps said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and Canada are continuing negotiations on a “Land, Sea and Air Preclearance Agreement” that would allow U.S. Customs to permanently work on the Canadian side of the border at some border crossings. Reaching that deal could prove to be difficult, given that past preclearance efforts have gotten hung up over Canada’s reluctance to allow armed U.S. Customs agents to work on the Canadian side of the border.

Neither Public Safety Canada nor the U.S. government offered any update as to the status of negotiations on that agreement.

“The details of any future agreement with the U.S. will be made public in due time as part of the regular treaty approval process,” Filipps said.

Meanwhile, Customs and Border Protection spokespeople failed to respond to repeated inquiries over three workdays from The Buffalo News about both the status of negotiations on that preclearance agreement and the pilot project’s revelations of CBP’s reliance on outdated technologies and procedures.

A Customs and Border Protection spokesperson in Buffalo said The News’ questions had been forwarded to the agency’s headquarters in Washington.

“Haven’t received anything yet” in response, the spokesman said in an email Monday afternoon that included a telltale tagline that only seemed to reinforce the agency’s reliance on technology that’s not necessarily the newest.