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# Funds sought for swap to e-passports

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Negotiations to secure federal government funding to introduce high-tech passports to Australian travellers are under way as a United States deadline for greater passport security looms.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is pushing for funding for the full-scale rollout of its \$160 million electronic passport program in the May budget.

If the government gives the project the green light, DFAT will start issuing e-passports — which store an electronic image of the passport holder on a computer chip — within months, meeting a US deadline that all visa-waiver countries have biometric identifiers in passports by October 26, 2005.

The assistant secretary of the department's passport branch, Bob Nash, said the department was sticking to the estimated \$160 million price tag for introduction, based on the fact that it would cost \$20 per passport and there were 8 million passports in circulation that needed to be replaced.

While he said the technology would probably get cheaper over time, the number of passports in circulation in 10 years was also likely to grow. "We're sticking with the estimation of \$160 million over 10 years at this stage."

Supporting DFAT's case for funding are the results of recent trials in Japan showing an improvement in the ability of technology to read the Australian e-passport.

In March the e-passports were tested against 16 different passport readers only one of which couldn't read the data on the chip.

It was a vast improvement on earlier trials at Baltimore-Washington International Airport in November, when Australian e-passports could not be read by one of six passport-readers being

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trialled. But the chair of the Australian Privacy Foundation, Anna Johnston, said interoperability wasn't the only issue to be addressed.

As the international standard was for the electronic data to be unencrypted, there wasn't any real protection against the data being "skimmed" or electronically

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lifted off the passport, she said.

"We're not only concerned about privacy and data security issues at the airport, but when travellers are overseas and keep their passport on their person that people may be able to skim it on the street," Ms Johnston said.

While DFAT was considering adding metal fibres to the passport that would create a shield between it and a mobile skimming device, Ms

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Johnston said data could also be skimmed off by hotel staff when they made a copy of a passport or held it overnight for check-in purposes.

Ms Johnston said there were also concerns about how the electronic data would be stored and used by Customs, including those overseas.

The Australian e-passports were now being provided to the Japanese Foreign Ministry for inclusion in an e-passport library

that is being established.

The library will provide a centralised facility for technology vendors to access e-passports from countries all over the world without having to approach the individual countries involved.

If visa-waiver countries do not meet the US deadline, which has already been extended, citizens travelling to the US will have to obtain a visa.