

Safe Passage

Border crossing simplified between the U.S. and Canada. BY HEATHER STEINBERGER

If you're a frequent flier, chances are you're already aware of the U.S. Transportation Security Administration's "trusted traveler program" that expedites airport screening. The agency developed the program after acknowledging the one-size-fits-all approach is inefficient and creates unnecessary hardships.

Boaters may not, however, be aware that a similar program now exists for those who frequently cross international borders with their vessels. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, part of the Department of Homeland Security, developed the voluntary Small Vessel Reporting System to expedite trusted boaters' crossings into the United States. SVRS will be available in Florida, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and, most significantly for *Lakeland Boating* readers, the Great Lakes.

"We rolled it out about a year ago in Miami, our test area," said Brian Bell, supervisory CBP officer and public affairs liaison at the Chicago field office. "Now we're rolling it out nationwide."

Bell said SVRS should be available in the Great Lakes by August. He also noted that CBP officers expected the heaviest use to be on Lake Erie.

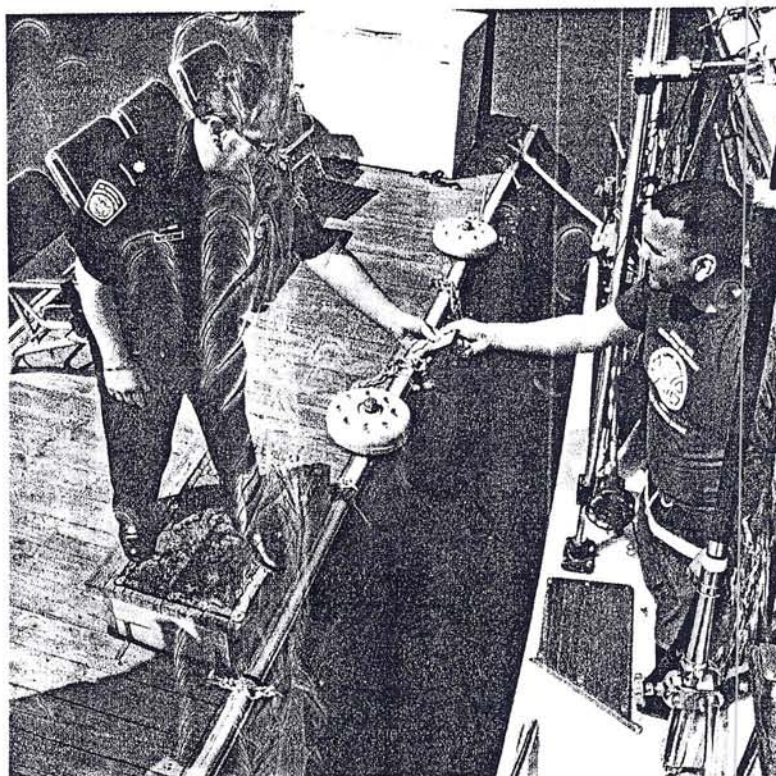
"Cleveland's the hotbed!" he acknowledged with a laugh. "Canada's an hour away, not two days away, like the Bahamas from Miami. So we're expecting heavy usage, with a lot of recreational boaters and fishermen traveling back and forth. Lake Superior is probably going to be our No. 2."

Border-crossing boaters used to call the CBP office and ask where to meet officers for processing. As with mass airport-screening methods, Bell said that procedure wasn't particularly helpful.

"It was time-consuming for officers, but it also wasn't fair to the boating community," he explained. "Our job is to facilitate international travel, not make it harder."

With SVRS, international boaters register with CBP online to get expedited clearance for their U.S. arrival. The system is open to all U.S. citizens and permanent residents, as well as Canadian citizens, Canadian landed commonwealth residents and Canadian landed immigrants who hold certain documents.

To participate, visit cbp.gov/svrs, fill out an online application and schedule a visit to your nearest enrollment center. CBP officers will vet applicants, a process that includes an in-person interview and checks against law-enforcement and anti-terrorism databases. There is no fee to apply; boat owners who are members of a CBP trusted traveler program can enroll without visiting an enrollment center.



"Once you're enrolled, all you have to do is fill out a simple float plan before you depart," Bell said. "Just say, 'I'm going to dinner in Canada and this is when I'll be back!'"

When arriving in the U.S., the captain will call CBP at the nearest Port of Entry with his or her float plan identification number, answer a few questions and receive clearance.

Bell acknowledged that fishing is a key recreational and commercial pursuit on both sides of the border.

"As far as the U.S. government is concerned, if you anchor in Canadian waters, you haven't left the U.S.," he advised. "It's only an issue if you've gone ashore or come in contact with a foreign vessel. The last thing we want to do is seize someone's boat because they went to dinner!"

Bell said SVRS will benefit everyone in the long run. Enrolled boaters will find crossing the border to be a more hassle-free experience. And CBP officers can focus efforts on noncompliant boaters, smugglers and potential terrorists.

"Our job is to make sure people with harmful intent don't enter the United States," he said. "After all, it would be very easy to blend in, especially on a beautiful Saturday out on the lake. But we want to make entering the U.S. as easy as possible for everyone else." ♦

U.S. Customs & Border Protection's new Small Vessel Reporting System (SVRS) will make border crossings easier for trusted boaters. SVRS will be available in the Great Lakes late this summer, and CBP anticipates the heaviest use to be on lakes Erie and Superior.

