US to seek social media details from certain visa applicants

May 4 2017, by Matthew Lee

The State Department wants to review social media, email addresses and phone numbers from some foreigners seeking U.S. visas, as part of the Trump administration's enhanced screening of potential immigrants and visitors.

The department, in a notice published Thursday in the Federal Register, said it was seeking public comment on the requirement. But it also said it is requesting a temporary go-ahead from the White House budget office so the plan can take effect for 180 days, beginning May 18, regardless of those comments.

The proposed requirements would apply to visa applicants identified for extra scrutiny, such as those who have traveled to areas controlled by terrorist organizations. The State Department said it estimates that the rules would affect about 0.5 percent of total U.S. visa applicants, or roughly 65,000 people.

Affected applicants would have to provide their social [media](#) handles and platforms used during the previous five years, and divulge all phone numbers and email addresses used during that period. U.S. consular officials would not seek social media passwords, and would not try to breach any privacy controls on applicants' accounts, according to the department's notice.

Since last year, immigration officials have sought social media information from some foreigners arriving at U.S. border checkpoints,

but that information had not previously been required on visa applications.

Homeland Security officials have said social media accounts for some asylum seekers and visa applicants would be checked. But those checks would be limited to public postings, raising questions about the effectiveness.

The new State Department rules also would require applicants to provide 15 years of travel and work history and the names and dates of birth of all siblings, children and current and former spouses or partners. Visa applicants are now generally asked for only five years of travel and work history and are not asked for information about their siblings.

The State Department said it wanted the additional information "in order to more rigorously evaluate applicants for terrorism or other national security-related visa ineligibilities."

The proposal follows a March directive from the State Department for all U.S. embassies and consulates to draw up criteria for "population sets" needing extra scrutiny before receiving U.S. visas.

Thursday's public notice is the first announcement linked to the so-called "extreme vetting" procedures Trump has advocated.