

Interview

Speed and Security at the Borders

An Interview with Robert E. Perez, Director, Field Operations,
New York Field Office, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Office of Field Operations



Robert E. Perez

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to his selection as Director, Field Operations (DFO) in New York, Robert Perez served as DFO and Port Director in Detroit and as the first Director of the Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism in Washington, D.C. Perez joined the U.S. Customs Service in 1992 as a Customs Inspector in Newark, New Jersey, and has served as Program Manager at U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) headquarters. He has represented the Department of Homeland Security and CBP as a border-security expert at scores of international business conferences, on official assignments alongside senior figures in U.S. and foreign government, and in the national and international press. A guest lecturer at eminent universities around the globe, Perez has been named Person of the Year by the Maritime Security Council and was given the Keys to the City by the Mayor of Cartagena, Colombia. He is a graduate of Rutgers University and of the Senior Executive Fellows program at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF As the single, unified border agency of the United States, U.S. Customs and Border Protection – a division of the Department of Homeland Security – is a 52,000-member federal agency responsible for securing America's borders against terrorist attacks, especially at the ports of entry. CBP (www.cbp.gov) also enforces laws regarding international trade, traveler admissibility, agriculture, and drug interdiction.

What can corporations do to assist U.S. Customs and Border Protection?

Multinational corporations that deal in the global economy – in all capacities, whether they're transporting people or cargo – have many opportunities to partner with U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Two things they can do that speak to our primary mission are enhancing the security of the people and goods for which they are responsible and facilitating their movement efficiently.

How can they make that happen?

In the cargo arena, there's a program by the name of the Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism, through which commercial entities can become partners with CBP and work with us cooperatively to secure their supply chain. We work alongside them with our security experts providing training and oversight and they, in turn, enhance their security measures. When they meet the standards we've set, they're able to move their goods through the border in a much more secure and efficient fashion, with fewer inspections. It's essentially a trusted traveler business program in cooperation with the federal government.

What have you done to improve upon this cargo program for corporations?

We're always looking for opportunities to improve. One of our goals is to acquire as much advance information as possible about foreign shipments before they arrive in the U.S. All the information about these commercial goods transactions further enhances our ability to manage risk. We need to identify the higher risk goods, and either work cooperatively with the host country to inspect those goods overseas – we have officers in 58 container ports around the world with the Container Security Initiative – or inspect them upon arrival here. We're also trying to identify high risk cargo more effectively, by obtaining some additional commercial information on those specific transactions. Information is a huge enabler for us, because it allows our frontline officers, who plow through our advanced targeting system and our databases of information, to become more familiar with what is coming at us and make more informed decisions about what we need to scrutinize.

What kinds of programs do you offer for individuals?

At JFK airport in New York, we've rolled out the Global Entry program. This is a program for pre-vetted individuals to provide them with

expedited clearance through the Customs and Border Protection process once they arrive at the airport.

What process must an individual go through to enroll in that program?

The program is modeled on both the NEXUS program, along the U.S./Canada border, and the SENTRI program, along the U.S./Mexico border, which are established passenger trusted-traveler programs. CBP has expanded that same concept into the air environment.

An individual fills out an application, we do a background check on him or her, and once all that has been cleared, we'll schedule an interview to make sure the requirements of the program are understood, in terms of what this individual needs to do in order to remain compliant. Upon entry into the U.S., these passengers can then approach kiosks we have set up at the international arrival terminals to initiate and expedite their clearance through the border.

Does the public understand that Customs and Border Protection is there to be friendly, rather than antagonistic?

Coming through an international border can be an intimidating experience. CBP is doing a couple of things to make the process less intimidating. For example, JFK and Newark airports are part of our Model Ports Initiative. In this initiative, we're working with the airline industry, the airport terminal operators, and the port authorities to create a pleasant arrival experience – and an efficient and safe one – for every international traveler, whether they're a U.S. citizen or a foreigner.

Who is responsible for instituting and driving these ideas?

Since the creation of CBP, which coincided with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in March 2003, we've been very fortunate to have some of the best senior leadership, not only in the department but in all of federal government. This is certainly true of Commissioner W. Ralph Basham. As soon as he came on board, he made it clear that he would move this agency forward following three guiding principles: being an intelligence-driven organization; enhancing our partnerships with both private and public sectors – law enforcement and industry; and being a pillar of integrity. Those principles have been instilled and institutionalized at so many different levels and in so many different ways throughout the organization. ●