AUSTRALIA will delay until late next year the roll-out of its biometric passport if US Secretary of State Colin Powell is successful in lobbying for a two-year extension to the introduction of laws that would have made the high-tech document mandatory for visitors to the United States.

Under legislation passed by the US Congress in 2002, aimed at making the country's borders more secure after the September 11 terrorist attacks, all travellers from countries that did not require a visa - including Australia, New Zealand and all EU countries except Greece - would have been required to carry travel documents containing a biometric identifier from October 26.

A biometric identifier refers to unique signatures like fingerprints, facial features, and iris characteristics. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has spent $6.6 million over the past two budget periods developing its own biometric passport based on a facial recognition system, and says it would have been one of the few visa-waiver countries to meet the October deadline.

But with US Secretary of State Colin Powell indicating this week that he would lobby Congress to for a two-year extension to the deadline, it seems unlikely that the new passports will be required this year.

Mr Powell argued that few countries had completed adequate preparation for the introduction of the biometric documents. Further, it is understood that US Customs is itself concerned that it will not have completed installation of biometric "readers" at border-entry points in time for the deadline.
Foreign Affairs Passport Branch assistant secretary Bob Nash said that while the department was ready to introduce the biometric travel documents if required, the extension was nonetheless welcome.

"It means that before we go ahead and do anything, we'll have the time to carry out testing to ensure that our system is compatible with the US system," Mr Nash said.

Assuming testing was completed without problems, and that the Australian Parliament passed legislation that would enable the implementation of the biometric passport system, Mr Nash said DFAT would expect roll-out to start "toward the end of next year".

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) announced last May that facial recognition would become the standard biometric technology used in travel documents.