



February 11, 2022

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The Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) submits the following for consideration in the formation of a new “National Travel and Tourism Strategy” [FR Doc. 2022–01795 Filed 1–28–22; 8:45 am]
BILLING CODE 3510–DR–P

GBTA is the world’s premier business travel and meetings trade organization headquartered in the Washington, D.C. area with global operations and 38 chapters across this country. Our membership of travel buyers and suppliers around the world manages more than \$345 billion USD in global business travel and meetings expenditures annually. GBTA delivers world-class education, events, research, advocacy, and media to a growing global network of more than 28,000 travel professionals and 125,000 active stakeholders and constituents within our industry.

GBTA is pleased the National Travel and Tourism Strategy is being reviewed and updated. GBTA supports this whole-of-government approach to accelerating full recovery and employment in the travel and tourism sector, including the importance the effects of climate change will have on travelers visiting the United States. GBTA offers up the suggestions and topics that follow for consideration.

COVID Restrictions and Testing Burdens

Recent GBTA polling of the global business travel industry shows a large majority of respondents continue to cite confusion over government policies and strict requirements as the top obstacles when considering and conducting international business travel. Key amongst these areas: strict testing requirements for cross-border travel. To further state this case, surveys of air passengers indicate that pre-departure testing is a leading factor in the decision not to travel internationally. People simply are unwilling to take the chance that they will be unable to return home at the end of their business trip or vacation. As a result, international travel in 2021 was 75.5% below 2019 levels.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that states consider a risk-based approach to the facilitation of international travel by lifting measures—such as testing and/or quarantine requirements—for individual travellers who are fully vaccinated, at least two weeks prior to traveling, with COVID-19 vaccines listed by the WHO for emergency use or approved by a stringent regulatory authority.

GBTA would ask the Strategy to follow GBTA's position that calls on all countries to examine their policies, global business market testing capabilities, and improvements in global vaccination rates, and subsequently adjust their testing requirements accordingly. Strong consideration should also be made for the U.S. to end testing requirements for vaccinated individuals, whether they are visiting or returning to the country.

Improve Travel Facilitation

In the age of COVID, reducing impediments to travel becomes even more important. To that end, the U.S. should address concerns of visa and passport processing.

1. Increase funding for Customs staffing and overtime at air and land ports of entry to efficiently facilitate the resurgence of inbound international travel
2. Fully resume visa processing and reduce wait-times by increasing staffing, streamlining renewals and implementing video conferencing for high-demand locations
3. The State Department should streamline and modernize the visa adjudication process by piloting videoconferencing technology in visa interviews with low risk, returning visa applicants.
4. Restart U.S. passport processing and renewals, which were shuttered during the pandemic.
 - a. The Department of State's Hand Carry Program allows for the transportation of executed passport applications that are submitted to a passport agency for expedited processing, and the retrieval of newly issued, expedited passports for delivery directly or indirectly to the passport holder. The program has been shuttered for 18 months. It has recently resumed but at pre-pandemic levels.
5. Mirror legislation, HR 4632 and S. 2635 Passport Backlog Elimination Act
 - a. Require the Secretary of State to submit a plan to eliminate the passport backlog within 30 days enactment of the legislation
 - b. Include a timeline that ensures processing time is 6-8 weeks for standard applications and 2-3 weeks for expedited applications.
 - c. State Department Inspector General must submit an audit on the effectiveness of the plan to eliminate the backlog.

Omnibus Travel and Tourism Act of 2021

The U.S. Senate legislation, Omnibus Travel and Tourism Act of 2021 has several items the new Strategy should incorporate.

1. Creating an Assistant Secretary position within the Department of Commerce focused exclusively on bolstering America's travel and tourism industry and coordinating a strategy across multiple federal agencies by establishing annual goals and recommendations.
2. Directing the Department of Commerce to study the effects of COVID-19 on travel and tourism and make policy recommendations.
3. Establishing a temporary joint task force amongst federal agencies to address the impact of COVID-19 on air travel both during and after the pandemic.

Changing Perceptions on Sustainable Travel

International travelers' opinions are changing. A recent Eurobarometer survey from October 2021 indicated that 82% of Europeans are willing to change their travel habits for more sustainable practices. To attract this new traveler, the U.S. must embrace, encourage and advertise sustainable travel.

Sustainable Mobility

GBTA believes travelers should have an infrastructure that meets their needs. Transportation infrastructure should, when geographically appropriate, encompass air, rail and other modes.

To encourage climate concerned travelers to visit, cities and regions should develop sustainable mobility for climate-neutral cities and increase of high-speed rail traffic in the near term.

Multimodality can contribute to deliver on efficiency gains, relieve congestion, and reduce the transport's overall carbon footprint. The use of other modes of micro mobility, such as bicycle and scooters rentals, walking, and bike paths can and should also play a role.

The Biden Administration has just released a process to distribute \$5 billion to states to expand the nation's network of charging stations for electric vehicles and speed the adoption of the technology. Cities and regions must embrace this technology and communicate its availability to international travelers.

Lodging

In efforts to make the U.S. a more attractive destination, strategies could include a renovation wave strategy with specific regulatory, financing and enabling measures to boost building renovation, making construction more energy and resource efficient.

Strategies could include environmentally friendly building design incorporating renewable energy and efficient water usage; support of LEED certification; automatic lights out mechanism when out of room; re-use of towels and reduction in single use plastics.

Understanding Carbon Impact

Consumers' choices must be empowered, through more transparent information about the sustainability and environmental footprints of the destinations/tourism services. The U.S. government should help to facilitate a standard method to substantiate green claims in travel + facilitate data collection on the environmental footprint calculation to monitor the industry's development on sustainability + make environmental footprint methodology accessible. For example, the International Aviation Transport Association (IATA) is developing a carbon calculator, however, to make it more effective further globally aligned standards are needed.

Decarbonize Air Travel

On February 4, 2022, the Toulouse Declaration on future sustainability and decarbonization of aviation was launched at the EU Aviation Summit. The declaration signals a growing political momentum to deliver emission reductions in the aviation sector, which is a key element in the sustainability journey of GBTA and the business travel industry.

The declaration is the first public-private initiative of its kind, bringing together over 35 European countries, the EU institutions, and numerous industry stakeholders in a commitment to decarbonize air travel by 2050.

GBTA commended the declaration for its ambitious and balanced approach to achieve long-term sustainability in the aviation sector.

The U.S. strategy should follow suit as it fits into GBTA's own sustainability objectives to support alliances across the travel ecosystem and a basket of measures to decarbonize air travel through the use of sustainable aviation fuels, market-based measures such as CORSIA, improved aircraft technology, and financial incentives.

Conclusion

Travel and tourism is being defined as a negative impact on the globe, spreading sickness and damaging the environment. If nothing is done, future overseas travelers will look at a trip to the U.S. as too big of a risk to take. The National Travel and Tourism Strategy must address new ways to combat the aversion to travel. GBTA encourages the focus be on easing and clarifying COVID-based restrictions and to arm regions, cities and industries with tools to combat climate change.