



2023 Congressional Summit on Travel & Tourism Talking Points

Travel and tourism is a driving force for economic growth, community building, and resiliency. According to the U.S. Travel Association, in 2023, international and domestic travelers directly spent \$1.2 trillion in American communities. This spending directly supported 8 million jobs and generated nearly \$160 billion in total tax revenues, including \$84 billion in state and local tax revenues.

Demonstrating travel's resiliency, domestic travel has quickly rebounded from the pandemic and in 2022, domestic leisure travel had recovered to 99% of its pre-pandemic levels and domestic business travel rose to 71% of pre-pandemic levels. International travel continues to lag and returned to 55% of its pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, domestic travel generated 90% of travel spending (\$1.09 trillion) with international visitors generating 10% of travel spending (\$240 billion).

As impressive as the numbers are, these economic gains cannot be taken for granted but must be nurtured and supported.

The Congressional Summit on Travel and Tourism is a platform to educate Members of Congress on the broad diversity of the travel and tourism sector and the significant contribution it makes to our national and local economies. It is an opportunity to deliver the message that tourism's vitality cannot be taken for granted. Recognizing that tough budget decisions must be made, we also recognize that our Representatives and Senators have to be leaders on the issues that are important to the economic health and growth of tourism and our communities.

Tourism doesn't just happen – it requires smart strategy, strong research, and creative promotion. And partnerships with key government agencies to help tourism communities better tell their stories and deliver exceptional travel experiences. These are the government programs and initiatives that tourism community leaders are talking about to advance the health and growth of the tourism sector.

Establish a Tourism Strategy for America's 250th Birthday Celebration in 2026

- In 2026, America will celebrate its 250th birthday and the American public will be encouraged to connect with the nation's special places and experience its unique stories. It is a tremendous marketing opportunity, especially for medium, small and rural communities, but that visitation won't happen without dedicated resources to plan, build and promote travel around the national birthday celebration.
- At present, the federal government is focused on international tourism with the International Trade Administration's National Travel & Tourism Office, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board; and the national public/private destination marketing organization, Brand USA. Few resources are available to build the domestic tourism market.
- On July 4, 2023, the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, known as the far more pronounceable America250, announced "America's Invitation" a three-year nationwide public awareness and engagement campaign to encourage every American to be a part of the historic commemoration. The launch was held at American Family Field in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the Milwaukee Brewers-Chicago Cubs game.
- With the launch of the campaign, federal agencies have been tasked with creating America 250 engagement strategies. STS has partnerships with key federal agencies, including the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, and we are beginning discussions on collaborating to build strategies to help communities leverage their cultural, historic and natural resources while driving visitation to frequently overlooked federal sites.
- At a time of deep divisions, encouraging Americans to engaged with our unique regional cultural traditions and remarkable histories is way to forge unifying bonds and drive understanding of what makes America exceptional.
- Nearly every state has now established a US Semiquincentennial commission to plan, promote, and implement public celebrations and commemorations of America's founding. We will be working at both the state and federal levels to develop programs and partnerships to encourage Americans to get and have those uniquely American experiences that are only possible through travel.
- America's 250th birthday should be more than a one-day event. Federal leadership is to ensure that essential investments in policies and programs are made to allow all communities large and small to engage in the national celebration and the economic benefits of tourism are fully leveraged throughout 2026.

America250 is just launching its community engagement program and we are initiating discussions with our federal partners, but we hope you will engage on

this issue and work with us to ensure that tourism communities are a key component of the America 250 celebration.

Strengthen the Travel and Tourism Economy

- One lesson of the unprecedented pandemic-related declines of travel and tourism is that the economic power of the sector cannot be taken for granted. As tourism and communities rebound it is clear that much work remains fully recover and rebuild a more resilient travel and tourism economy.
- Last year, the Visit America Act was approved to create an assistant secretary position within the Department of Commerce to focus on developing and implementing a national strategy to expand the travel and tourism economy, streamlining government processes affecting business and leisure travel, and facilitating U.S. bids for international meetings and events that would help drive inbound travel to destinations across the country.
- The Act formally authorizes the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board to serve as the advisory body to the Secretary and help develop a 10-year travel and tourism strategy that sets goals for international visitation and travel exports, and ensures domestic policy is optimal for achieving these priorities.
- In order to fulfill the mandates of the Visit America Act, additional funding is needed to allow for successful implementation.
- The President's 2024 Budget included \$3.5 million for the Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration to allow for the establishment of a new Travel and Tourism office that would be overseen by Assistant Secretary for Travel and Tourism. The Budget Request also included \$1.5 million for Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis to meet the expanded research required under the Act.
- Lead Committees: House Appropriations Committee, Senate Appropriations Committee
- ★ *Representatives: Support \$5 million in Fiscal Year 2024 in the Department of Commerce appropriation to implement the Visit America Act.*
- ★ *Senators: Support \$5 million in Fiscal Year 2024 in the Department of Commerce appropriation to implement the Visit America Act.*

Provide Dedicated Investments in Coastal Restoration

- The Reinvesting in Shoreline Economies and Ecosystems (RISEE) Act, S. 373 would establish several dedicated streams of funding for coastal infrastructure and resiliency in order to protect vulnerable communities and businesses most impacted by sea level rise and coastal erosion. It is bipartisan legislation authored by Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Rep. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI).
- A companion bill has been introduced in the House, H.R. 913, by Rep. Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX) and Rep. Randy Weber (R-TX).
- Currently, federal law requires that all revenues generated from offshore wind leases and production beyond state waters are returned to the U.S. Treasury, unlike other forms of energy where royalties are shared with adjacent states and conservation programs.
- The RISEE Act would create a revenue-sharing model for offshore wind revenues, sending 37.5% of offshore wind revenue to adjacent states based on a formula developed by the Secretary of the Interior inversely proportional to the distance from the offshore wind site.
- State funds could be used for a number of activities, including coastal restoration, hurricane protection, or infrastructure improvements; mitigate damage to fish, wildlife, and other natural resources through fisheries science and research; implementation of federally approved marine, coastal, or comprehensive conservation management plans.
- The RISEE Act would dedicate funding for the National Oceans and Coastal Security Fund, which provides grants to coastal and Great Lakes communities to respond to coastal erosion and sea-level rise, restore coastal habitat, and make improvements to coastal infrastructure. Currently, the Fund does not have a dedicated source of funding, The RISEE Act would:
 - Direct 12.5% of offshore wind revenues to the Fund
 - Make improvements to the Fund, including specifying how funds are allocated between the national competitive grant program and grants to coastal states
- The RISEE Act would reform the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) to allow for more equitable resource sharing between states and federal conservation programs.
- The bill eliminates the GOMESA state revenue sharing cap of \$375 million and removes the Land & Water Conservation Fund's state side funding cap of \$125 million.

- Endorsing organizations, include: Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund, National Audubon Society, American Sportfishing Association, Citizens for Responsible Energy Solutions, Orsted, American Clean Power Association, National Wildlife Federation, National Marine Manufacturers Association, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, American Shore & Beach Preservation Association, National Ocean Policy Coalition, Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, City Parks Alliance, National Recreation and Parks Association, National Ocean Industries Association, Citizens Climate Lobby, Ducks Unlimited, National Association of State Energy Officials, Joint Ocean Initiative Commission. National Association of Counties, Consumer Energy Alliance, National Association of State Outdoor Recreation Liaison Officers, Great Lakes Dredge & Dock, Avangrid, Shell, Ocean Conservancy, Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, Evangelical Environmental Network, The Conservation Fund, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, Center for Sportfishing Policy, Coastal Conservation Association, Delta Waterfowl, Wildlife Mississippi.
- Lead Committees: Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee, House Natural Resources Committee
- ★ *Senators: Cosponsor S. 373. (Note: Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA), Sen. John Kennedy (R-LA), and Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) have cosponsored.)*
- ★ *Representatives: Cosponsor H.R. 913. (Note: Rep. Donald Davis (D-NC), Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC), and Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) have cosponsored.)*

Connecting Food, Culture, and Tourism: The AGRITOURISM Act

- Food is an essential element in telling the story of a community. Drawing on history, culture, and local agriculture, chefs, restaurateurs, craft brewers, distillers, vintners, farmers markets, festival and event organizers, and culinary shops are illuminating the rich traditions and agricultural resources of their communities.
- In turn, farmers, ranchers, and growers are increasingly turning to agritourism to diversify their revenue streams, provide educational and recreational opportunities to kids and families, and build deeper connections with their communities.
- By connecting with tourism, these small and family-owned businesses are expanding their audience while helping to deliver extraordinary travel experiences.

- Agritourism also helps to preserve regional traditions and spurs economic development in rural communities – according to the most recent Census of Agriculture, agritourism-related income increased by nearly 370 percent from \$202 million in 2002 to \$949 million in 2017.
- Despite the importance of agritourism to the tourism economy, there is no dedicated voice for agritourism within the federal government and no place for agritourism business owners and local economic development officials to learn about the federal resources available to them.
- In the last Congress, Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-VA) and Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-WA) introduced the Accelerating the Growth of Rural Innovation and Tourism Opportunities to Uphold Rural Industries and Sustainable Marketplaces (AGRITOURISM) Act, which would create an Office of Agritourism within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, tasked with advising the Secretary of Agriculture on agritourism-related policy matters, promoting agritourism activities, and ensuring that information about federal resources available to agritourism businesses is easily accessible. The bill will be re-introduced shortly.
- Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) is sponsoring a companion bill in the Senate but wants to recruit a Republican sponsor before the bill is introduced.
- Lead Committees: House Agritourism Committee
- ★ *Representatives: Become a cosponsor by contacting Chris Gibson with Rep. Wexton at Chris.Gibson@mail.house.gov or Chris MacArthur with Rep. Newhouse at Chris.MacArthur@mail.house.gov*

Senators: Consider sponsoring a companion bill in the Senate. Contact Sydney Scott with Sen. Baldwin to become a sponsor, she can be reached at: Sydney_scott@baldwin.senate.gov

Bolster the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Recreation Program

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is one of the leading providers of recreation opportunities on public lands and waters, managing nearly 257,000 facilities across 43 states.
- U.S Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) lake and river projects attract approximately 268 million recreation visits every year, and the economic impact on these areas is enormous. In Fiscal Year 2021, approximately \$12.3 billion was spent by visitors in communities with 30 miles of USACE projects and approximately 120,600 jobs were supported by visitation to USACE lake and river projects.

- The recreational facilities at these projects significantly enhance many communities, contribute to their quality of life and those of park visitors, and support state and local governments' economic development and job creation efforts.
- Under current law, local units of the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service can retain 80% of recreation fees collected on site. These funds are dedicated to the site's operation and maintenance needs without approval from headquarters, allowing them to be nimbler and more responsive with the planning decisions. Currently, USACE recreation facilities are excluded from the benefit.
- In addition, the Challenge Cost Sharing Cooperative Management Program was established for participating agencies to split operation and management (O&M) expenses and responsibilities with eligible outside groups. USACE, however, is limited to partnering with non-federal public entities, despite most of its partnering interest comes from private and non-profit organizations.
- Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-MN) and Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND) have introduced the Lakes Access Keeping Economies Strong (LAKES) Act, S. 1358, to improve outdoor recreation facilities in USACE-managed areas, provide new opportunities for public-private investments, and give local districts more flexibility to reinvest their resources.
- The LAKES Act addresses these discrepancies, by allowing USACE to:
 - Retain 80% of recreation fees collected onsite for O&M at that location.
 - Enter into cooperative agreements with local non-profits.
 - Handle partner-collected fees and return them to the partner jointly managing the recreation facility to reinvest onsite.
- Approving the LAKES Act would assist USACE in addressing its maintenance backlog, managing increased demand for recreation opportunities, and driving positive visitor experiences.
- Lead Committees: Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
- ★ *Senators: Cosponsor 1358. (Note: Sen. John Boozman (R-AR) has cosponsored)*
- ★ *Representatives: Consider sponsoring a companion bill in the House.*

Uphold the National Heritage Area Program

- For two decades, the National Park Service (NPS) has administered a National Heritage Area program under its mission to preserve nationally significant natural and historic resources. Successful National Heritage Areas embody locally driven partnerships that blend education, cultural conservation, resource preservation, recreation, and community building.
- Throughout the Southeast, collaborations between National Heritage Areas, state and local tourism offices, and businesses have delivered exceptional travel experiences, strengthened the skills and work of community-focused tourism organizations, and amplified the voice of tourism as a powerful engine for community building and economic growth.
- Developed as a program of NPS, National Heritage Areas are not part of the National Park System, but are a foundation of NPS's community engagement efforts. NPS provides a range of essential resources to National Heritage Areas, including technical, planning, and limited financial assistance.
- On average, National Heritage Areas match each federal dollar at rate of somewhere between three to five and a half dollars and is an exceptional example of a public-private partnership.
- Last year, Congress approved the National Heritage Area Act, which establishes a standard criterium for the funding, management, and designation for national heritage areas and set an annual authorization of \$1 million for each national heritage area, ensuring the programs long-term sustainability.
- The passage of the National Area Act also created seven new national heritage areas, three of which are in the Southeast.
- For Fiscal Year 2024, an appropriation of \$34 million has been requested to allow all 62 national heritage areas to meet their NPS-approved management plan. The funding level would support the seven new heritage areas and ensure stability for the remaining authorized heritage areas.
- Lead Committees: House Appropriations Committee, Senate Appropriations Committee

Representatives: Support an appropriation of at least \$34 million of the National Heritage Area Program.

- ★ *Senators: Support an appropriation of at least \$34 million of the National Heritage Area Program.*

Support Funding for the National Scenic Byways Program

- National Scenic Byways recognize and protect historic, scenic, and culturally significant roads across 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The recognition brings substantial recognition and economic benefits to nearby communities, especially rural communities, by attracting visitors who spend money on local businesses and services.
 - Scenic Byways are critical drivers of tourism and economic development, particularly for rural communities. For example, according to the National Park Service, in 2021, the Blue Ridge Parkway attracted 15.9 million visitors who spent an estimated \$1.3 billion in local communities in North Carolina and Virginia, supporting 17,900 jobs. During the same year, the Natchez Trace Parkway drew 6.4 million visitors, who spent \$178 million in local communities in Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi, supporting 2,100 jobs.
 - In 2019, Congress approved the Reviving America’s Scenic Byways Act, which directed the Department of Transportation to reopen the designation process for the National Scenic Byways Program, adding new roads for the first time since 2009.
 - The Fiscal Year 2023 appropriations for the Department of Transportation included \$20 million for the program.
 - For Fiscal Year 2024, maintain the National Scenic Byways Program with an appropriation of at least \$20 million.
 - Lead Committees: House Appropriations Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee
- ★ *Senators: Support the \$20 million funding level for Scenic Byways in FY24.*
- ★ *Representatives: Support the \$20 million funding level for Scenic Byways in FY24.*

Advance Policies to Rebuild the Travel & Tourism Workforce

- America is experiencing a workforce crisis. Every segment of the travel and tourism economy is dependent on a strong workforce to deliver great customer service and exceptional visitor experiences. Currently, there are 10.7 million job openings and just 5.9 million unemployed Americans.
- The challenges faced by travel and tourism businesses are the most visible demonstration of what businesses across the economy and the nation are dealing with in hiring enough workers to return operations to pre-pandemic levels.

- The economy will not fully rebound from the COVID pandemic until businesses, like hotels, restaurants, and stores, are able to hire sufficient staff.
- States and communities are ramping up workforce development programs to deliver capable employees to the local industries offering jobs and economic stability. Intermediate efforts are needed to expand the workforce to fill the hiring gap.
- The H2-B visa is a temporary work visa program that was established in 1986 to focus on non-agriculture employers to facing labor shortages in seasonal jobs. In practice, H2-B visas are most frequently used by landscaping, construction, restaurants and hospitality businesses. H2-B visas are available to employers that have not been able to find unemployed persons in the U.S. capable of performing the work. H2-B visa holders do not have a pathway to permanent residence or citizenship.
- Since 1992, H2-B visas have been capped annually at 66,000 visas.
- In January 2022, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced an increase of 64,716 H2-B visas to be issued in Fiscal Year 2023, increasing the overall allotment to 130,716.
- Access to the H2-B guest worker program should also be expanded by exempting returning workers who previously worked in the U.S. within the last three years from the annual H2-B visa cap the following year.
- As employee recruiting and retention are expected to be an ongoing challenge for restaurants and hotels in 2024, it is critical that the federal government continue to provide expanded annual allotments for H2-B visas.
- The Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act, H.R. 3734, has been introduced by Rep. Lloyd Smucker (R-PA) and Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX) to expand the nation's workforce through a three-year, market-driven, non-immigrants visa program that provide growth opportunities and career paths without the need for a college degree. The bill establishes a H2-C visa that would fill jobs that have remained open for a certain amount of time and are located in areas where the unemployment rate is 7.9% or less.
- In its first year, 65,000 H2-C visas would be permitted with an allotment for small businesses. In subsequent years, the allotment would increase or decrease depending on how many were utilized the year before and how quickly the allotment was filled.
- On June 22, the House Appropriations Committee included in the Homeland Security Appropriations Bill a provision to exempt returning worker from the H2-B cap.

- Lead Committees: House Appropriations, Senate Appropriations, and House Judiciary Committee
- ★ *Representatives: Support the returning H2-B worker exemption language in the Homeland Security Appropriations bill and expanded allotments of the H2-B visa for FY2024, and cosponsor the Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act.*
- ★ *Senators: Support the returning H2-B worker exemption language in the Homeland Security Appropriations bill and expanded allotments of the H2-B visa for FY2024, and consider sponsoring companion bill to Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act.*

Join the Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus

- The bipartisan Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus is an excellent information resource for staying abreast of the key issues impacting the tourism industry.
- In the House, the Caucus is co-chaired by Rep. Dina Titus (D-NV) and Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL).

Join the Congressional Travel & Tourism Caucus, which is a positive statement that you recognize the importance of tourism to the economic vitality of your district and are working in a bipartisan manner to advance policies that ensure the health and growth of the state's travel and tourism industry.

To join the Caucus, reach out to Mitchell Moonier with Rep. Dina Titus at Mitchell.Moonier@mail.house.gov or Chris Jones with Rep. Gus Bilirakis at Cjones@mail.house.gov