

POLICIES TO RESTORE THE TRAVEL ECONOMY

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the travel industry. A staggering 65% of all U.S. jobs lost in 2020 were supported by travel, and they cannot fully recover without a swift return of all segments of travel. According to Tourism Economics, domestic business travel is currently on course to remain 57% below 2019 levels this year, while international travel is due to remain 70% down in 2021.

While some progress has been made to bring back domestic leisure travel, it's nowhere near enough to make up for the devastating losses in business travel and inbound international travel, which are both currently on track to not fully recover until 2024. The following policies would help stabilize local travel markets and significantly quicken the pace of recovery.

RESTORE INBOUND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

With vaccination levels on the rise and COVID-19 infection rates diminishing, the time is right to provide a roadmap and timeframe for allowing inbound international travel to safely resume. Individuals that can document full vaccination or pass a PCR test should be allowed to visit the U.S. without entry restrictions—beginning with visitors from our top inbound travel markets, such as the United Kingdom, European Union, and Canada. For further information, please see our [Policy Framework for Safely Restarting International Travel](#).

RESTORE BUSINESS TRAVEL

In 2020, business travel declined by around 69%, with travel spending related to meetings, conferences and events declining even further (-76%). Until business travel and professional meetings and events are fully restored, the pace of economic recovery will continue to suffer. Therefore, the following measures are necessary for a quick and robust recovery:

- **Provide tax credits to help convention centers, exhibition halls, and other meeting venues safely reopen.** Many meeting venues were not eligible for the Paycheck Protection Program or Shuttered Venue Operators Grant Program due to program restrictions. Without targeted assistance, these venues will not be able to make the investments needed to fully restore operations or mitigate coronavirus-related health risks. For further information, please see our factsheet on the [Hospitality and Commerce Job Recovery Act](#).
- **Provide tax credits to encourage businesses and nonprofits to begin planning and contracting for conventions, conferences, and trade shows next year.** With the discontinuation of infectious disease coverage in event cancellation insurance policies, many meeting planners will not be able to take the risk of planning for events next year without significant commitments from prospective participants now. For further information, please see our factsheet on the [Hospitality and Commerce Job Recovery Act](#).
- **Distinguish professionally structured meetings and events from mass gatherings in COVID-19 guidelines.** For further information, please visit the [Let's Meet There website](#).

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BRAND USA

Brand USA is the highly successful public-private partnership charged with promoting the U.S. as a destination to global travelers. As a public-private partnership, Brand USA is funded in part from the ESTA fee with a matching contribution from industry partners.

However, coronavirus-related restrictions on inbound international travel have led to a 38% decline in ESTA fee revenue this year, and potentially a 90% decline next year. The Commerce Department's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board estimates that Brand USA will need as much as \$250 million in supplemental appropriations outside of the matching process to restart global marketing campaigns and prepare international travelers for new COVID-related protocols.



VISA PROCESSING

As of April 8, 2021, just 76% of consulates are either fully or partially closed to routine visa processing, representing 71% of all visa applicants. For the few U.S. embassies and consulates that are open and processing visas, visa applicants face significant delays. Average wait-times have skyrocketed to more than three months (95 days), with 31% of sites that are open projecting wait times longer than 4 months and around 22% projecting wait times longer than 6 months.

Until visa processing rates are fully restored across the board, consulate closures and excessive visa interview wait times will serve as a drag on our nation's economic recovery and global competitiveness. To address this issue, we recommend the following policies:

- **Develop a Plan to Restore Routine Operations at U.S. Embassies and Consulates.** To help ensure U.S. embassies and consulates are reopened in a clear, consistent, and predictable manner, the State Department should develop a risk-based plan to determine how and when to resume routine operations abroad.
- **Develop a Plan to Streamline Visa Adjudication.** The State Department should consider waiving in-person interviews for all low-risk applicants, renewing visa applicants across visa classes, and using video conferencing technology to streamline the visa interview process.
- **Ensure Visa Application Processing Supports U.S. Economic Recovery Efforts.** To support U.S. economic recovery efforts, the Administration should prioritize the processing of B1/B2 visas from safe and secure markets with close ties to the U.S.

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INFRASTRUCTURE

While countries around the globe modernize their travel infrastructure, the United States has fallen woefully behind—leading to a transportation network that propagates the isolation of economic regions, fails to adequately serve the needs of travelers, and stifles growth. Federal policies and programs must be updated to more adequately fund airport infrastructure, prioritize highway and multimodal projects that improve national travel mobility, increase funds for passenger rail service, and modernize National Park infrastructure—as well as invest in hyperloop technology and electric vehicle charging infrastructure. For further information, please see U.S. Travel’s [Infrastructure Priorities Factsheet](#).

ECONOMIC RELIEF

As the country emerges from the pandemic, COVID-19 restrictions remain in place in different parts of the country and COVID variants continue to present a threat to a return to lockdown. As such, economic relief through grants or low-cost loans should remain available to struggling travel businesses until the whole country is able to fully reopen without restrictions.