

GAO

Testimony

For Release
on Delivery
Expected at EDT
2:00 p.m.
Wednesday
July 18, 1990

Foreign Visitor Facilitation

Statement of
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Before the
Foreign Commerce and Tourism Subcommittee of
the Committee on Commerce, Science
and Transportation
United States Senate



048487 / 141808

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss with you our preliminary observations on foreign tourism in the United States. Specifically, we have been looking at the issues and conditions that affect the speed and ease with which a foreign visitor can gain entry to the United States. We also have been reviewing particular conditions at major U.S. international gateway airports. In the course of our work, we have identified several factors that affect visitor facilitation, including obtaining a visa, the amount of airport congestion, the adequacy of airport facilities, the complexity of the federal inspection¹ process, and the availability of services that airports provide to foreign visitors. Further, we noted that the actions and policies of the three entities most directly involved with visitor facilitation--airport authorities, airlines, and the federal inspection services--have a major impact on how efficiently foreign visitors may enter the United States.

BACKGROUND

A major transformation is taking place in the realm of tourism: Americans, who have for years been the world's tourists, are now becoming the hosts as well. It should come as no surprise that the

¹The federal inspection services include the following agencies: the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS); the United States Customs Service (USCS); the Public Health Service (PHS); and the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

United States has become a major tourist destination. This is a country of great natural beauty and variety, offering visitors a myriad of attractions in U.S. cities and national parks and forests, as well as diverse cultures and geographic regions. There has been tremendous growth in the number of foreign visitors² to the United States. The Department of Commerce's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration (USTTA) reports that since 1985, the number of foreign visitors to the United States has grown 49 percent. Approximately 38 million foreign visitors came to the United States during 1989, according to USTTA, and it forecasts that by the year 2000, the number of foreign visitors will increase by 75 percent of the 1989 figure.

Several factors have contributed to the growth of foreign tourism in the United States, such as

- the strength of foreign currencies against the dollar, making the United States a "better buy" for foreign tourists;

- the increasing affluence of many countries in East Asia and Western Europe, which has permitted citizens of those countries the luxury of foreign travel; and

²Foreign visitors are non-U.S. citizens who come to the United States for a temporary time period for the purpose of business and tourism or for other reasons.

-- the opening of borders and lifting of travel restrictions in the former Eastern Bloc countries, which has allowed their citizens greater freedom to travel.

Foreign tourism provides many economic benefits to the United States. According to USTTA, foreign visitors generated revenues of approximately \$43 billion in 1989 -- more than the U.S.' leading exports, including agricultural goods (\$37 billion); chemicals (\$32 billion); and motor vehicles/parts (\$25 billion). USTTA also reported that in 1989, foreign travelers to the United States directly supported an estimated 570,000 U.S. jobs and generated over \$4 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues.

How foreign visitors are greeted and received at airports is important, because this is their first impression of the United States. Many American tourists return from travels in Europe with tales of airport facilities and services for foreign tourists that may be lacking at our own international airports, such as speedy transit through Immigration and Customs; convenient translation services; free maps and informational guides; readily available assistance in locating lodging and making reservations; and efficient, inexpensive ground transportation. Conversely, there have been reports of foreign tourists being "greeted" in the United States by long, slow-moving lines at Immigration and Customs; lengthy waits for baggage; unavailable translation services; problems in getting ground transportation; and scams by taxi

drivers charging exorbitant fares. To the extent that these reports are true, they make the United States a less attractive tourist destination.

At your request, we looked into the difficulties foreign tourists face in general, and specific conditions found at the largest U.S. international gateway airports, in particular. To accomplish this task, we met with officials representing various organizations concerned with visitor facilitation, and reviewed conditions at 13 of the largest U.S. international airports. (See app. I.)

I would now like to discuss the circumstances foreign visitors must deal with as they proceed from the first step of deciding to visit the United States to the point of departure from a U.S. airport and the actual start of their visits. This process includes visa acquisition, passing through the airport facilities, being processed through federal inspection, and using airport services.

THE DECISION TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES

Travel and tourism promotion is primarily a private sector undertaking. However, there is some limited federal government involvement, primarily by USTTA, which has a budget of \$14 million for fiscal year 1990. In addition, state governments have become strong promoters of tourism. According to the Travel Industry

Association of America, state tourism offices spent about \$280 million promoting domestic and international tourism in 1989, a considerable increase over the \$89 million they spent 10 years ago.

Obtaining a visa is often the first contact someone planning to visit this country has with the U.S. government, and generally it is not a problem for many visa applicants. However, this process can be time-consuming and tedious for citizens of some countries, where applicants may wait in line for several hours at the local U.S. embassy before receiving their visas.

ARRIVAL AND THE FEDERAL INSPECTION PROCESS

Once a potential foreign visitor has obtained a visa, he or she will encounter three further entities that preside over the process of entering the United States. These are: (1) the airport authorities, (2) the federal inspection services, and (3) the airlines. Although each of them has a different function or mission, all three share the desire to aid visitors' entrance into the United States. All three also recognize that this process is not carried out as quickly and efficiently as it could be. However, each apparently views the source of the problem differently.

-- Airport authorities believe that the source of the problem is that the airlines' scheduling causes "peaking"--the arrival of

many airplanes within a narrow time period--and that the airports and the federal inspection services are not able to adequately handle the processing of passengers at peak times.

-- The staff of the federal inspection services also believe that the source of the problem is the airlines' scheduling, and that the airport authorities do not provide adequate facilities for passengers, luggage, and the federal inspection process to handle peaking.

-- The airlines maintain that they are bound by the desires and needs of their customers, that peaking is simply a result of customer demand, and that the source of the problem is that airport authorities and the federal inspection services are unable or unwilling to adequately meet customers' demands.

A sharp increase in international travel combined with all of the above factors have caused congestion that taxes the airlines, the airports, and the federal inspection services. Of the airports we reviewed, all reported congestion problems--particularly during peak times--causing delays for international flights.

Peaking problems are the result of various factors. Arrival times at U.S. international airports are restricted by noise and pollution control regulations, as are departure times for U.S.-bound flights from many other countries. Passenger preference and

the need to meet connecting flights also dictate arrival times. Passenger preference for things such as destination and time of arrival is an important consideration, particularly in view of the amount of money foreign visitors spend getting here and during their visits.

In 1989, an estimated 23 million foreign visitors arrived in the United States by air. While there are over 400 primary airports in the United States, relatively few handle most international air traffic. The 13 airports we reviewed handled about 66 percent of all international air passenger arrivals in 1989.

Leaving the Plane and Entering the Airport

The presence of a federal inspection facility and the necessary federal inspection staff distinguishes international airports from domestic airports. Some international airports have inadequate holding capacity for foreign visitors awaiting clearance by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and Customs. In fact, 7 of the airports we visited do not even have a transit lounge, forcing airlines to hold passengers on the plane if there are any backups in the clearance process. This circumstance costs the airlines money, since it decreases the use of the plane and can make for irritated and frustrated passengers.

The Federal Inspection Clearance Process

Each of the four agencies constituting the federal inspection process has different responsibilities in clearing passengers. Typically, incoming passengers go through INS to have their travel papers reviewed and stamped, and pick up their luggage, which is then inspected by Customs. Passengers carrying plants or animals must go through an APHIS inspection, and passengers who appear to have a contagious disease or other illness may be subject to inspection under Public Health Service regulations.

INS inspects the travel documents of every traveler who arrives on an international flight, including foreign visitors and returning U.S. citizens. About 49 percent of people entering the country at the airports we reviewed were returning U.S. citizens. Previously, INS tried to speed up the inspection process by using the "citizens bypass system," under which it did not inspect the travel documents of returning U.S. citizens. However, based on a reexamination of the statute, INS determined it could no longer use the citizens bypass system. As a result, the INS' work load has increased, which, in turn, has added to its average processing time.

INS has been able to handle this increased work load, however, because it has had significant growth in staff since 1987. It has financed the added staff and overtime as a result of a user fee of

\$5 per passenger. This fee is charged on all international airline and oceanliner tickets except those of passengers from Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean. Nevertheless, despite the growth in INS staff, airport managers consider INS staffing inadequate at a number of airports.

Passengers ordinarily pick up their luggage after clearing Immigration but, at some airports with inadequate facilities, they now must carry their baggage through Immigration. Further, late delivery of luggage, too few luggage handlers, and/or too few or too small luggage carrousel can cause passenger delays in obtaining their luggage and proceeding to Customs.

Customs has the conflicting goals of (1) enforcing laws affecting what can be brought into this country and (2) facilitating the entry of foreign visitors and returning U.S. citizens. Despite the enormous increase in Customs' work load over the past few years, the number of Customs staff at international airports has remained relatively constant. While a second \$5 per passenger user fee is added to the cost of tickets to fund Customs services, Customs cannot directly access the fees to increase its staff, but it can be used to pay overtime.

To meet the increasing work load without a commensurate increase in staff, Customs has been implementing its Master Plan for the 1990s, under which it selectively inspects passengers. Unlike INS, which

must inspect all passengers, Customs physically inspects only passengers who meet a profile it has developed of people most likely to be carrying contraband or violating other laws. This screening allows about 90 percent of the passengers to spend little or no time in Customs. Customs officials have stated that the amount of contraband confiscated has not decreased since Customs began selectively inspecting passengers.

Federal inspection officials consider federal inspection facilities inadequate for efficient operations at nearly every airport we reviewed. Facilities at 12 of the 13 airports we reviewed were too small or too poorly configured for efficient Customs and/or Immigration operations, according to federal inspection officials.

Although the Congress has supported the International Civil Aviation Organization's recommended world-wide goal of 45 minutes from the time the plane lands to the time that all passengers are cleared through the government inspection process, this goal was not being met during peak times at many of the airports we reviewed. Processing time usually ranged from 1 to 2 hours at these airports during peak times.

Generally, neither the APHIS nor the Public Health Service cause delays in passenger processing. Relatively few passengers are subject to either APHIS or Public Health Service inspections.

SERVICES/LEAVING THE AIRPORT

The number and quality of services provided at the airport after the visitor clears the federal inspection process are important in making the visitor feel welcome and assisting the visitor in reaching his or her destination. Most of these services are performed by contractors or provided by the airport authority.

Signs directing visitors to the baggage claim area, into and out of the federal inspection area, and to airport services can facilitate the flow of passengers through the airport. However, signs are in English only, or English and international symbols at 3 of the airports in our review. Signs at some airports reflect a heavy concentration of particular foreign visitors. For example, at Honolulu International Airport, there are Japanese signs, since such a large proportion of Hawaii's foreign tourists are Japanese; there are signs in Spanish at Houston (Texas) International Airport to accommodate Houston's many Mexican visitors. Signs at 6 airports were in more than one foreign language. O'Hare International Airport is testing, in one of its international terminals, electronic signs that can be programmed to call up 7 different languages.

One of the major complaints about airport services is the lack of free baggage carts or the need to surrender the free baggage carts available in the federal inspection area upon exiting. Ten of the

airports we looked at provide baggage carts, usually for a charge, that can be used throughout the terminal, while the remaining 3 provide free baggage carts which must be surrendered upon leaving the federal inspection area. In the latter case, travelers usually have the option of hiring a skycap or paying (usually \$1) for a cart upon leaving the federal inspection area.

Twelve of the airports in our review offer some form of full-time translation services. One of the smaller airports hires part-time translators only during the peak foreign tourist season (summer). At some of the airports, translators are available only in the federal inspection area, while others provide translation services throughout the international terminal. Translation services may be provided in person, by phone, or by a computer terminal.

Translation services at the airports ranged from a capability for communicating in four or five languages to the combined capability of 17 languages, the latter provided by translators at Miami (Florida) International Airport. In addition, USTTA administers the Gateway Receptionist Program, which employs college students with foreign language skills as translators who assist both foreign visitors and the inspection services in the federal inspection process. The program is funded by USTTA and work study grants from the Department of Health and Human Services. Participants in the program are also given training in all aspects of airport

management. This program operates at 7 of the airports we reviewed.

All but one of the airports we reviewed have foreign tourist information booths, most of which provide maps, brochures on popular local attractions, and lodging, dining, and transportation information. At least 8 of the airports provide some type of information printed in one or more languages other than English. For example, JFK (New York) International Airport provides a guide to the airport in several languages, and Logan International Airport provides a map of Boston in four languages. In addition, bilingual or multilingual staff are available at many of the information booths to provide assistance and information.

Of the airports we visited, all provide lodging information for those who need it--often at the foreign tourist information booths--and some provide assistance in obtaining lodging. In some cases, lodging assistance consists of a hotel/motel phone board, a service that is paid for by the hotels and motels represented on the board--usually chain hotels and motels located near the airport. Unfortunately, these are not always the accommodations sought by tourists, who often prefer staying in the city or near tourist attractions. Logan International Airport in Boston has a hotel reservations booth, similar to those typically found at major European airports, staffed by bilingual or multilingual people who

make lodging recommendations for a wide range of budgets, and actually book the reservations as well.

Currency exchange services are available at all of the airports we looked at and generally operate when international flights arrive. Most of the currency exchange booths remain open until 30 minutes after the last international arrival of the day. However, currency exchange booths are not always conveniently located. For example, at one airport, the currency exchange booth is located on the departure, rather than the arrival, level of the terminal.

Ground transportation services are available at all of the airports we reviewed. Such services generally include buses, taxis, rental cars, airport shuttles to nearby hotels or other locations and, in some cases, rapid transit. At Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, phone lines and a display board (in English only) provide transportation information, while Newark International Airport provides a pamphlet warning visitors in eight languages to be aware of unauthorized ground transportation.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS

At all of the 13 airports we looked at, renovations or new facilities are either planned, under construction, or were recently completed, to increase capacity and allow for more efficient federal inspection processing. Expansion projects may include

plans for larger or new terminals with more gates and newly designed, larger federal inspection areas. Nearly every expansion project includes plans to increase the number of luggage carrousel in the federal inspection area.

In addition, the following projects are underway:

- Orlando (Florida) International Airport is providing video tapes to airlines to show in flight, which describe in five languages the federal inspection process at the airport.

- At O'Hare in Chicago, a computerized translation service is being tested. Computer screens give information on lodging, transportation, and so forth, in all major languages.

- The Department of Transportation is considering expanding the "open skies" policy, whereby the United States negotiates an agreement with another country allowing an unlimited number of flights from the country to land at any U.S. international airport. This policy reduces congestion at the most heavily used international airports by encouraging the rerouting of incoming international traffic to lesser-used airports and new hubs. However, INS and Customs are concerned about their ability to meet staffing needs at airports that would receive more international traffic under an expanded open skies policy.

-- The U.S. Department of State is testing a visa waiver program. This 3-year pilot program allows passengers from eight designated countries to simply fill out an information form at the airport for INS, instead of having to obtain a visa abroad. Countries with high rates of traffic to the United States and a low risk of immigration violations, based on historical experience, were selected for visa waivers. Unlike normal visa holders, however, applicants under the visa waiver program give up their right to appeal the decision if they are denied entry to the United States. This can save INS legal costs. The State Department would like to see this program expanded to include 30 to 35 qualifying countries. Although the visa waiver program facilitates entry for foreign visitors participating in the program and reduces the State Department's work load, it does not reduce the INS' work load or processing time, according to some INS and airport officials, since it still requires the inspection of a travel document (the visa waiver form).

-- Customs and Immigration are using preclearance and preinspection programs to reduce their costs and processing work load at major airports and to facilitate the entry of foreign tourists. Preclearance is the full inspection of passengers and their baggage at foreign ports by U.S. federal inspectors. Currently, there are nine preclearance ports in Canada, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. Generally, precleared passengers are eligible for entry into the United

States without undergoing any other checks by federal inspectors at U.S. ports of entry and may even arrive at domestic airports. Preinspection is a partial (INS only) inspection conducted at some Bahamian airports and at Shannon Airport in Ireland. As of this summer, INS is also conducting a pilot preinspection program at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in the United Kingdom.

INS strongly supports preclearance and preinspection because of the time and cost savings. If an individual is found inadmissible in the originating country rather than in the United States, the airline refuses to allow the individual to board the plane, and INS is spared detention, court, and deportation costs that would be incurred if the individual were denied entry at a U.S. port.

-- Increased automation, where used, has decreased processing time. For example, increased use of machine-readable travel documents and automated baggage inspections has speeded processing at some airports. However, other airports do not have the necessary equipment, such as machine readers, to make use of all the technological innovations.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Although the airport authorities and the federal inspection services might prefer more evenly spaced flights to avoid peaking and would like other options to redistribute their work loads, the reality is that prevailing airline schedules reflect travelers' needs based on desirable arrival times, connecting flights, and other considerations. The challenge to the federal inspection services and airport authorities is to find a way to do the best and most expeditious job they can, operating within the parameters determined by travelers' needs.

The entities concerned with the facilitation of foreign visitors are making great efforts to solve existing problems. However, adequate facilities are critical to the issue of facilitation. For example, if there are not enough luggage carousels, everyone loses--passengers, the airlines, airports, and the federal inspection services. Based on our work to date, we offer the following preliminary observations on possible actions to take to better facilitate foreign tourism:

-- Although USTTA is not responsible for providing adequate airport services and facilities for foreign visitors, perhaps it could be active in designing a model plan for receiving foreign travelers. This plan could give guidance to airport operators who want to provide the best possible services and

facilities to foreign visitors who pass through their gates. Such a model could incorporate some of the more innovative projects underway at various airports, such as machine-readable document capability, computerized translators, lodging information and reservations booths, and multilingual video tapes for airlines.

- USTTA could also consider expanding the Gateway Receptionist Program, which benefits (1) foreign tourists who speak little or no English, (2) federal inspectors, and (3) college students who are able to make good use of their foreign language skills. Funds necessary to expand the program could be provided on a matching funds basis by USTTA and participating airport authorities, as is done now at most participating airports.

- To more efficiently use its resources, INS could consider seeking appropriate legal authority to reinstate the use of the U.S. citizens bypass system. This program would substantially decrease INS' inspection work load and speed the flow of passengers through the clearance process, since about 49 percent of all passengers on international flights that landed in the airports we reviewed are returning U.S. citizens.

- Exemptions from user fees for travelers from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean could be removed to give INS and Customs more funds to improve their processing capabilities. The foreign

visitors who pay the user fees are certainly entitled to receive adequate services for their money.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The following are the 13 airports included in our review, and the number of foreign visitors that entered the U.S. at each in 1989.

1. John F. Kennedy International Airport	4,942,400
2. Miami International Airport	2,610,400
3. Los Angeles International Airport	2,013,200
4. Honolulu International Airport	1,415,900
5. San Francisco International Airport	805,800
6. O'Hare International Airport (Chicago)	632,600
7. Orlando International Airport	509,000
8. Houston Intercontinental Airport	505,600
9. Logan International Airport (Boston)	474,300
10. Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport	340,400
11. Newark International Airport	299,100
12. Atlanta International Airport	274,600
13. Seattle-Tacoma International Airport	274,600
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Total foreign visitors at 13 airports	15,097,900
Total foreign visitors at all U.S. airports	22,724,900