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Efforts to Improve Reception of Foreign  
Visitors at U.S. Airports

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



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to testify before this Subcommittee on the reception of foreign visitors at U.S. airports. I will discuss our recent recommendations for improving facilities and services for foreign air arrivals and what steps are being taken to implement these recommendations.

Approximately 39 million foreign visitors<sup>1</sup> came to the United States during 1990. The number of foreign visitors to the United States has grown about 50 percent since 1985 and is expected to increase by about 75 percent of the 1990 figure by the year 2000. Foreign tourism provides many economic benefits to the United States. According to the Department of Commerce's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, foreign visitors to the United States generated estimated revenues of \$51.1 billion in 1990--more than the leading U.S. exports, including agricultural goods (\$40.1 billion) and chemicals (\$36 billion). In 1990 foreign travelers to the United States directly supported an estimated 850,000 U.S. jobs and generated \$5.5 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues.

In July 1990 I testified before you on foreign visitor facilitation, and in March 1991 we issued a report on the issues

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<sup>1</sup>Foreign visitors are non-U.S. citizens who come to the United States for more than 24 hours but less than 1 year, for the purpose of business or tourism or for other reasons.

and conditions affecting the speed and ease of entry of foreign visitors at U.S. international airports.<sup>2</sup> The report highlighted specific conditions at 13 of the 15 largest U.S. airports. For our report, we reviewed the federal inspection process,<sup>3</sup> airport services and facilities, and projects to improve visitor facilitation. At the 13 airports we reviewed, we found that routine clearance processing during peak times significantly exceeded the International Civil Aviation Organization's worldwide time goal. This goal aims at allowing only 45 minutes to pass from the time a plane lands until all passengers are cleared through the federal inspection process. We also found that the quality and extent of airport services (ground transportation, translation services, lodging information, directional and informational signs, baggage carts, and currency exchange) varied widely at the airports we reviewed. Furthermore, federal inspectors at 12 of the 13 airports we reviewed considered airport facilities inadequate.

Based on these findings, we recommended that the Secretaries of Commerce and Transportation take certain actions to improve foreign visitor reception. I would like now to discuss these recommendations, including recommendations for (1) speeding the

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<sup>2</sup>Foreign Visitor Facilitation, (GAO/T-NSIAD-90-56, July 18, 1990) and INTERNATIONAL TRADE: Easing Foreign Visitors' Arrivals at U.S. Airports, (GAO/NSIAD-91-6, March 8, 1991).

<sup>3</sup>The federal inspection process involves the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the U.S. Customs Service, the Public Health Service, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

federal inspection clearance process, (2) expanding the Gateway Receptionist program, and (3) developing model guidelines for airport services and facilities, and the progress made towards implementing them in the 4 months since our report was issued.

#### SPEEDING THE FEDERAL INSPECTION CLEARANCE PROCESS

In our March 1991 report we recommended that the Secretary of Commerce work with other Department heads to speed the clearance process for arriving international air passengers and consider proposals for reinstating the U.S. citizens bypass system<sup>4</sup> at all airports to ease Immigration's work load and removing user fee exemptions in order to provide more funds to Immigration and the U.S. Customs Service.

The Department of Commerce concurred with our recommendation to work with other Departments to speed the clearance process for arriving international air passengers. The Department of Commerce's May 10, 1991, response to this recommendation stated that the Department is working with two interagency groups: (1) the National Transportation Facilitation Committee (NTFC) and (2) the Tourism Policy Council. The NTFC, composed of government and private sector representatives, coordinates the development, implementation, and conduct of programs that affect the movement of

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<sup>4</sup>Between 1978 and 1989, INS speeded up the inspection process by using a "citizens bypass system," under which it did not have to inspect the travel documents of returning U.S. citizens.

passengers and cargo through U.S. international airports, seaports, and land ports. The Tourism Policy Council, a federal interagency coordinating council chaired by the Secretary of Commerce, works to assure that the national interest in tourism is fully considered in federal decision-making.

#### U.S. Citizens Bypass System

The U.S. citizens bypass system, which was in effect from 1978 to 1989, reduced the workload of Immigration officers and made more personnel available to process incoming foreign visitors. However, at the time of our review it was no longer in use because Immigration officials questioned whether the U.S. citizens bypass system was consistent with INS enforcement objectives. Despite these concerns, Immigration officers at two of the busiest airports, New York's John F. Kennedy International and Miami International, employed U.S. citizens bypass in 1990. The practice was again stopped when the Gulf War forced tighter security measures at all U.S. airports. Currently, there seems to be some disagreement about how to expeditiously process U.S. citizens.

Although Immigration officials have stated that they will no longer use U.S. citizens bypass, they recently implemented a substitute system referred to as "Accelerated Citizen Examination." The procedure still involves scrutiny of all U.S. citizens' travel documents by an Immigration official. However, U.S. citizens will

be subjected to computerized checks only on a selective basis, thus saving inspection time. An Accelerated Citizen Examination may be used at any airport at the discretion of the supervisory Immigration officer, particularly when peaking (the arrival of many planes within a narrow time period) occurs or the number of returning U.S. citizens is particularly high.

Other agencies involved in the inspection process have views on the extent of INS screening of arriving U.S. citizens because it may affect the agencies' abilities to carry out their responsibilities. The Department of Commerce reported that the U.S. Customs Service could support reinstatement of a U.S. citizens bypass system if international airlines would expand their participation in the Advance Passenger Information System (APIS), a program that allows participating air carriers and foreign governments to electronically transmit to federal inspectors information on arriving passengers. Customs developed APIS as a means of promoting selective inspections. The transmitted names and dates of birth of the passengers are automatically compared to the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS)<sup>5</sup> and foreign law enforcement data bases. Because APIS performs the query before a flight arrives, federal inspectors should be able to clear arriving passengers much more quickly.

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<sup>5</sup>The Interagency Border Inspection System is a single data base query system for both INS and Customs that incorporates all of the lookouts and warnings from inspection and law enforcement agencies at the point of first contact with the passenger (Immigration).

Successful use of APIS requires the cooperation of all airlines and airport authorities and several airlines were beginning to use APIS as a means of speeding the federal inspection process. However, some Customs officials believe that with INS' use of Accelerated Citizen Examination, there is little incentive for the airlines to participate in APIS to speed the federal inspection process. This concerns some Customs officials, who view INS' use of Accelerated Citizen Examination as a good move for "facilitation" purposes, but a bad move for enforcement: Customs' selective inspection process depends, to a certain extent, on INS' cooperation in obtaining passenger information and querying the IBIS system.

#### User Fees Exemptions

The legislative exemption from the \$5-per-passenger user fee for air travelers from Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean has been eliminated for Immigration. This fee could add approximately \$75 million to Immigration's annual budget, allowing it to hire more inspectors and presumably improve its processing capabilities. The legislative user fee exemption for passengers from these locations is still in place for Customs. Customs would like to see the exemption eliminated, an action which could also add approximately \$75 million to Customs' budget. The airline industry, which supported the lifting of the exemption for Immigration, is studying whether or not to support a similar action for Customs.

## EXPANDING THE GATEWAY RECEPTIONIST PROGRAM

We recommended that the Secretary of Commerce direct the head of the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration to consider expanding its Gateway Receptionist Program. The Department of Commerce agreed to do so. It stated that it will seek and respond to more airport "partners" if it receives additional appropriated funds.

The Commerce Department's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration administers the Gateway Receptionist Program for foreign visitors. The program, which began at John F. Kennedy International Airport about 20 years ago, employs college students with foreign language skills as translators. These students assist foreign visitors who speak little or no English and help in the federal inspection process. The program operates at only seven of the airports we reviewed for our study.

The Gateway Receptionist Program is funded by the Travel and Tourism Administration, participating airports and work study grants from the Department of Education. The budget request for the Gateway Receptionist Program for fiscal year 1992 is \$240,000, the same as the amount for fiscal year 1991. Airport operators at five international airports that did not previously have Gateway Receptionists have inquired about obtaining Gateway Receptionist services. These airports include those in (1) San Antonio, (2) Phoenix, (3) Detroit, (4) Orlando, and (5) Newark.



## DEVELOPING MODEL GUIDELINES FOR AIRPORT SERVICES AND FACILITIES

We also recommended that the Secretary of Transportation request that the NTFC design a comprehensive model plan for providing quality airport services and facilities for foreign visitors and that this model plan be completed within 12 months (by March 1992). The Department of Transportation concurred with our recommendation. According to the Department of Transportation's May 13, 1991, response to the recommendation, development of the guidelines will rely heavily on suggestions from airport operators in the United States as well as on airport operators of international airports in other countries and on airlines and air travel organizations. The Transportation Department, as chair of the NTFC, will coordinate the project.

### The National Transportation Facilitation Committee

We believe that the NTFC is the appropriate body to develop model guidelines.<sup>6</sup> There are three entities involved in foreign visitor facilitation--airport authorities, federal inspection services, and airlines. Because the activities of all three affect international travelers, we believe that a working group that

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<sup>6</sup>The Department of Transportation established the NTFC in 1984. In the past, the Committee focused primarily on the federal inspection services. It published "Guidelines For Federal Inspection Facilities at Airports" in 1990 to help provide the best possible federal inspection facilities at U.S. international airports.

includes representatives from all these entities is the best forum for addressing and trying to resolve foreign visitor facilitation problems.

On January 30, 1990, prior to issuing our report, we met with members of the NTFC to discuss whether they could develop model guidelines for providing the best possible foreign visitor services and facilities. The Committee members agreed to do so.

According to the NTFC and the Department of Transportation, the airports--individually and through the Airport Operators Council International--and the airlines are very enthusiastic about this project and have been very supportive. This support is important because the development of useful guidelines depends heavily on the participation of the airport operators and the airlines. Federal agencies contributing to the development of the guidelines include the federal inspection services, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration. The staff of the Department of Transportation's Assistant Secretary for Policy and International Affairs will coordinate development of the model guidelines.

Since our report was issued, NTFC members have taken steps toward completing the guidelines, including the following actions:

- They have developed an outline of what they want to include in the guidelines.
  
- They have visited two major international airports in the Washington, D.C., area--Dulles and Baltimore-Washington International--to collect information and observe problems with services and facilities for foreign visitors. They attempted to look at these airports from the perspective of foreign visitors. In both cases, representatives of the airports accompanied the NTFC group on their tours, and the NTFC group pointed out problems they observed at the airports.
  
- In April 1991, there was a meeting in Washington of U.S. airport operators representing all the major U.S. airports. At the meeting, NTFC members asked that the operators submit to NTFC by September 1991 their ideas and suggestions for the airport services and facilities guidelines. NTFC members are also contacting the foreign members of the Airport Operators Council International through its international headquarters in Geneva to ask them to submit ideas. Some NTFC members believe that many innovative ideas in airport services and facilities for foreign travelers can be found in foreign international airports.

After the model guidelines are developed, the next step will be to apply those guidelines at a U.S international airport. The NTFC

should choose an airport for implementing and testing the guidelines to learn what does work and what does not. Airports are long-term projects, so it is important to start planning now to meet the challenges in future years when even more foreign visitors are expected to arrive at U.S. airports.

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