

United States Senate

November 13, 2020

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Wolf:

There needs to be a multi-layered approach to combat COVID-19 and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS or Department) is on the frontlines when it comes to putting together safeguards for air travel. This makes DHS uniquely positioned to support and advance the recovery of our nation's travel and tourism industry, along with the restaurant and hospitality businesses that rely on it.

In 2019, travelers spent \$1.1 trillion in the United States on food services, lodging, transportation, recreation, and retail spending. Due to COVID-19, air travel has suffered. One recent report has found that more than half of the 88 million jobs supported by aviation globally could be lost as a result of the pandemic. The jobs losses will span airlines, airports, aerospace companies, jobs related to air travel and tourism, as well as companies that sell goods and services to the air transport chain.¹ U.S. airlines are already laying off tens of thousands of workers following the expiration of the Payroll Support Program at the end of September. The unemployment rate for the leisure and hospitality industry remains at 19 percent, the highest of any U.S. industry and almost 2.5 times the national rate.² In the broader economy, job growth has slowed sharply and more layoffs have become permanent, signaling a slow economic recovery from this pandemic.³ Travel and tourism must improve if we hope to substantially bring back the economy and businesses in this country.

There are several critical actions your department can take to increase the safety of the American people while also facilitating a secure increase in air travel. We urge you to act on the following.

COVID-19 Protections and Standards

The administration's "Runway to Recovery" guidance document offers recommendations but lacks the enforcement necessary to ensure travel is as safe as possible during this pandemic. The Department plays a critical role in processing travelers seeking to enter this country as well as the entire flying population. We urge you to work with other federal departments and travel stakeholders to implement and communicate clear, cohesive policies and standards that limit the

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/30/business/coronavirus-aviation-jobs-atag/index.html>

² <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea31.htm>

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/september-jobs-report-unemployment-rate-2020-11601593020>

spread of COVID-19 throughout the air transportation system. These policies should be reasonably uniform and well communicated to lessen the burden on travelers and help restore public confidence that air travel can be resumed in a safe manner.

In working with other federal partners and stakeholders, we also urge you to consider options to safely reopen international travel. Many governments are implementing pre-travel testing regimes that will allow travelers with a recent negative COVID-19 test to enter a jurisdiction without having to quarantine. Another concept being considered are travel “bubbles” or “corridors” where destinations establish an agreement to safely facilitate travel. A national system, in conjunction with other protective measures, such as thermal screening with the proper training and protocols, could offer increased protections against COVID-19 transmission while jumpstarting travel with other countries. Without assistance, international travel may not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024.

TSA Screening

One of the most basic precautions to take during this pandemic is social distancing, maintaining six feet of distance from other people outside of your home.⁴ This can become challenging at a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint. Even before this pandemic, TSA checkpoints could be a major bottleneck in airports as passengers wait to be screened. TSA’s efforts to limit physical contact and practice social distancing are necessary steps during this pandemic. We encourage TSA to allow each airport to take steps that include opening additional checkpoints in order to keep wait times low in both Pre-Check and regular lanes. On October 18, TSA hit a milestone, screening more than one million passengers in a day for the first time since March. This highpoint emphasizes the critical need to reduce crowding and enforce social distancing at checkpoints.

To ensure TSA checkpoints don’t become transit points for COVID-19, it is crucial that Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) are given adequate amounts of personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitation supplies, and proper training. Additionally, passengers should be **required** to wear a mask while going through the checkpoint, except when their identity is being confirmed by officers. This would follow a strong recommendation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that masks should be worn by all passengers and personnel in transportation hubs.⁵

Trusted Traveler Programs

There are programs under the jurisdiction of the Department that directly impact travelers’ experience and processing times spent in close proximity to other travelers. One program is the TSA PreCheck program that makes low-risk individuals eligible for expedited security screening at airports. As of May 2020, the vast majority of PreCheck passengers wait for less than five minutes at a TSA checkpoint.⁶ Encouraging travelers to apply for Pre Check would increase the

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/face-masks-public-transportation.html>

⁶ <https://www.tsa.gov/precheck>

amount of prescreening that can be done, as well as reduce wait times and physical contacts in the screening process for more people.

Global Entry also allows pre-approved low-risk travelers to go through expedited clearance upon entry into the United States. As with PreCheck, program members are able to enter a separate screening lane that is faster and decreases time spent at a screening checkpoint that is generally a bottleneck for travelers. Efforts to promote the Global Entry program among those countries able to participate will further expand this trusted traveler program.

We understand that operating hours for TSA PreCheck enrollment centers and Global Entry processing centers have begun returning to normal. We encourage you to prioritize an efficient processing of applications, particularly for Global Entry applications which had a backlog of applications even before the pandemic. The timely processing of these applications will increase security, diminish the creation of bottlenecks and touchpoints in airports, and improve the traveler experience.

Expanding Preclearance Operations

The Preclearance program under U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) allows the United States to create an early line of defense by screening international passengers for immigration, customs, and agriculture processing, before they board a plane to the United States. This allows passengers to depart their plane after a long flight, bypass security screening they've already completed, and immediately exit the airport.

We are encouraged by recently announced efforts to improve the process for adding countries to the Preclearance program and recommend outreach to Asian countries in particular. In 2019, four of the top 10 countries to send international visitors to the U.S. were Asian⁷ yet no countries from this region participate in Preclearance. Building on the success of the Preclearance program by expanding beyond the current six countries will provide a clear benefit to travelers, airports, and airlines.

Conclusion

Although all 50 states have announced steps to reopen aspects of travel and the economy, one survey has found that only about one-third of respondents would be comfortable going on vacation.⁸ This comfort level drops when asked specifically about international travel and nearly 80 percent of respondents answer that it will be six months or more before they would be at ease traveling abroad.⁹ As long as air travel remains depressed, the hospitality and affiliated industries will not be able to recover economically and will affect big and small businesses, workers, and state and local governments who critically need additional tax revenue.

⁷ https://travel.trade.gov/outreachpages/download_data_table/Fast_Facts_2019.pdf

⁸ <https://morningconsult.com/2020/09/29/tracking-consumer-comfort-with-dining-out-and-other-leisure-activities/>

⁹ Id.

Your actions regarding air travel will have tangible impacts for this entire nation and we urge you to make air travel as safe, expedient, and efficient as possible.

Sincerely,



MAZIE K. HIRONO
United States Senator



CATHERINE CORTEZ MASTO
United States Senator



AMY KLOBUCHAR
United States Senator



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senator



RON WYDEN
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/s/ Jack Reed

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ELIZABETH WARREN
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