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SCPRT Director Prosser Testifies at U.S. Senate Hearing; Calls for Warmer Reception for Legitimate International Visitors

COLUMBIA – An unwelcome reception for international visitors is hindering America's ability to compete in the growing market for global tourism, South Carolina's chief tourism officer told a U.S. Senate panel on Tuesday.

The United States also needs a nationally coordinated international marketing campaign to offset negative perceptions that are quickly dissipated once travelers leave the security counters and directly experience America and Americans, Director Chad Prosser of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism told the Subcommittee on Interstate Commerce, Trade and Tourism of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

At the Tuesday morning hearing in the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., Prosser shared with the Senate panel his perspective on federal efforts to boost state tourism nationwide and on recommendations made recently by the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board and Discover America Partnership (DAP).

Prosser said a recent DAP survey of non-U.S. international travelers shows that 72 percent describe their time here as "great" once they get beyond the entry experience. However, the treatment visitors receive, or expect to receive, from Customs and Border Patrol agents is keeping many international visitors away, the DAP survey showed.

"The survey shows that they fear they will be detained for hours because of a simple mistake or misstatement at a U.S. airport. They also perceive that the United States makes little effort to attract visitors and that the U.S. government does not want their travel business," Prosser said.

"I can tell you anecdotally from my own discussions with international tour operators and direct experience with international visitors that these are the primary deterrents keeping legitimate visitors away from our country," said Prosser, who has led South Carolina's tourism industry through four years of unprecedented growth.

"The right to travel freely and safely, for recreation, for education, for business, has become a hallmark of American life and a cornerstone of our economy," he added. "Sharing that part of American culture with the world not only supports our diplomatic efforts abroad, it makes a real difference in the lives of Americans who benefit economically from a growing world tourism market."

Tourism is South Carolina's single largest industry and is the fourth-largest export industry in the world, following chemicals, automobiles and fuel. However, America's share has plummeted since Sept. 11, 2001, dropping 17 percent despite the growth of outbound travel from key markets and a weak dollar that generally makes travel here more affordable for foreign visitors.

Prosser noted that outbound travel from Europe grew by 3.2 percent last year but travel from the United Kingdom, the largest supplier of overseas visitors to the United States, fell by 3.7 percent. And travel from Germany plummeted 20 percent from 2000 to 2005.

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“Visualize a local restaurant,” Prosser told the panel. “Now let’s assume that this restaurant does not advertise that it is open for business and has no signage to indicate its location. This restaurant also requires reservations but has no one available to answer the phone.

“Additionally, when by chance customers do come to the restaurant, the maitre’d is rude and questions why the customers have come to his restaurant.

“This restaurant might have the best food in town, and offer great service once you get past the reception desk, but with all the obstacles on the front end, it’s unlikely to have much business.

“This is the situation in which the United States finds itself today as a travel destination. In a world of choices, we cannot afford unnecessary obstacles that hinder our ability to compete.”

Prosser stressed that neither he nor other industry leaders were arguing for less-stringent security measures at the nation’s entry points.

“I’m certainly not suggesting that our Customs and Border Patrol agents become travel counselors handing out brochures and giving directions,” the SCPRT director said. “However, the job of ensuring that our borders are secure can be done with the same welcoming attitude and professionalism displayed daily by those who work in state Welcome Centers across the nation.”

The Senate 9/11 Bill and Rice-Chertoff Initiative aimed at improving the entry process are “positive steps,” Prosser said at the hearing. “Congress should continue its efforts to make the entry process more welcoming and efficient while closely monitoring how these initiatives are implemented on the front line.”

Prosser also told the Senate panel that while tourism is a major industry, it’s largely made up of a diverse group of small to medium-sized businesses. A nationally coordinated marketing campaign would benefit both them and the large corporations involved in travel and tourism, he said.

He said he supports the recommendations of the Discover America Partnership and the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board to “re-establish a nationally coordinated umbrella marketing program to enhance our national image and to ensure that American businesses can fully participate in the growing market for international tourism.”

“Unlike many mature industries, we have only scraped the surface of the potential for the U.S. tourism industry,” Prosser told the panel.

The hearing was held in the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. The committee is chaired by Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii and the hearing was presided over by Sen. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota. Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina is a member of the committee.

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