

THE PRESIDENT'S EXPORT COUNCIL

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

June 6, 2012

President of the United States of America  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We have worked closely with you to help realize the enormous potential of the travel industry to help achieve your goal of doubling U.S. exports in the next few years. We appreciate the important steps you have taken to improve the U.S. visa process and urge further reforms to build on this progress.

Spending by international travelers is a significant U.S. export that contributes positively to America's trade balance – and while great progress has been made in the past year or two, there remain even more opportunities for our economy. Larry Summers, former director of the National Economic Council, told the PEC last year that “the easiest way to increase exports and close the trade gap is by increasing international travel to the United States.”

Over the past two years, the travel industry has far outpaced the rest of the economy in job creation. The industry has recovered more than half of its jobs lost during the recession; since the employment recovery began in early 2010, the industry has increased employment by 260,000. In 2011, travel exports grew by 14 percent, with international visitors responsible for one of every seven dollars spent in the U.S.

The Department of State has undertaken initiatives that have substantially reduced wait times for nonimmigrant visas at our busiest posts. By adding over 100 visa adjudicators in China and Brazil this year, adding interview windows and extending service hours, the State Department has significantly expanded its capacity to issue visas. In addition, the State Department has created a new pilot program that permits interview waivers for certain qualified low-risk visa renewal applicants and announced it will open two new consulates in Brazil by 2014. Taken together, these steps reflect a determination to tailor security safeguards to the actual degree of risk, rather than to rely on a one-size-fits-all approach.

Executive Order 13597 significantly complements these management reforms through promoting collaboration of the Departments of Commerce, State, Interior and Homeland Security and directing the development of a National Travel and Tourism Strategy. We support the Executive Order's commitment to increase non-immigrant visa processing capacity in China and Brazil by 40 percent in 2012 and to ensure that 80 percent of non-immigrant visa applicants are interviewed within three weeks. We also support the goal of expanding the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

Despite the progress that has been made, additional steps could help to further realize the potential of the travel industry to contribute to U.S. exports. In particular, we wish to highlight a few key objectives:

Lower Visa Wait Times

U.S. consulates have experienced surges in visa demand, which have led to lengthy wait times

for visa applicants to interview with a consular officer. This problem was evident in parts of Brazil last year, where some people waited over 100 days for a visa appointment. The reforms implemented by U.S. consular officials in recent months in Brazil are working and will pay significant dividends in terms of both bureaucratic efficiency and public diplomacy. Having made such strides, however, it is critical to stay a step ahead of demand for U.S. visas around the world.

Today 35 percent of overseas visitors to the United States require an entry visa. According to the Department of Commerce, by 2020 that number is expected to rise to 51 percent. We should plan for this growth in demand to prevent backlogs from developing in the future. Now is the time to raise further our standards; toward that end, we specifically propose that you establish a two-week visa interview wait time benchmark for all non-immigrant visas, recognizing that resource and security considerations and the need to ensure provision of consular services to U.S. citizens may require specific exceptions. Setting this goal will help to ensure that the progress made is sustained in the future.

#### Expand the Visa Waiver Program

Bipartisan legislation is currently before Congress that would amend the qualification criteria for the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and restore authority for the Secretary of Homeland Security to designate new VWP nations with visa refusal rates under ten percent. We urge the Administration to continue to work with Congress to move legislation forward this year. We welcome your nomination of Taiwan for VWP and your commitment to work with Poland, Croatia, and Brazil to meet the requirements of the program and to continue your discussions with Chile.

#### Negotiate Longer Term Visas

The U.S. has ten-year visa reciprocity terms with a number of countries, including Brazil and India. However, with other countries, including China, the U.S. provides only one-year multiple-entry visas. Visa validity is governed by reciprocal treatment of U.S. citizens, and we encourage you to continue negotiating for longer visa validity. This would allow us to grant longer validity periods for Chinese nationals which, in turn, would reduce the visa workload of U.S. consulates in China and allow them to process U.S. visas more efficiently. The economic benefits would far outweigh any costs and, properly managed, would not reduce U.S. security.

Once again, Mr. President, we appreciate your work to promote international visitation and the economic stimulus it will yield. We look forward to continuing to work with you toward achieving your export objectives for the United States.<sup>i</sup>

Sincerely,  


Jim McNerney

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<sup>i</sup> Please note this letter was prepared by the private sector appointed members of the PEC.