

Foreign Tourists Ill Informed About Travel Security Successes, Panel Told

By Alexandre Da Silva - Scripps Howard

June 24, 2004

The United States may need to better advertise its accomplishments to protect the tourism industry, a House committee was told Wednesday.

(AXcess News/SHFW) Washington - The United States spent a lot of time and money tightening airport security after the Sept. 11 terrorists attacks, but it may need to better advertise its accomplishments to protect the tourism industry, a House committee was told Wednesday.

"International travelers are still down," said Eric Pearson, senior vice president for e-commerce for the InterContinental Hotels Group. He and others testified before the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection.

He said international travelers, who generated \$13 billion in tax revenue last year, "are declining as a direct result of post-9/11 concerns coupled with confusion about airport security policies going forward."

Fred Lounsberry, senior vice president of sales for Universal Studios Recreation Group, said there's no marketing effort to communicate the positive aspects of security programs, which are overshadowed by bad publicity.

Lounsberry said that, although people may celebrate the capture of potential terrorists, they are

more likely to complain about missing a flight connection or having their baggage searched.

"People know more about delays than about positive aspects of the program," he said. "We desperately need a way to positively market our message."

Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., said perhaps the government could subsidize positive advertisement in the European Union and other countries.

Pearson, illustrating how negative publicity affects air travel behavior, said before Sept. 11, 2001, travelers would drive if a trip took four hours or less. After the attacks, he said, travelers would drive for six hours before buying an air ticket.

Though tourism industry officials backed heightened security, fearing that a terrorist attack would severely damage their business, they also worry that airport delays and long screening lines scare visitors away.

They cited stories of international scientists who have missed conferences, students who were prevented from completing their studies and relatives banned from visiting their families as serious obstacles to restore the economy to its pre-Sept. 11 levels.

Stewart Verdery Jr., Department of Homeland Security assistant secretary for border and transportation security policy and planning, said input from the travel industry and school officials is being used to draft new policies to speed visa approvals, passenger processing and checkpoint operations.

"We are aware of the loss to the economy," said Verdery, who attributed most airport security delays to a lack of personnel. He said whenever there's a big national event - such as President Reagan's funeral or the Super Bowl - security officials migrate to those places, draining resources from other areas.

Verdery said immigration policies have been revised frequently since the attacks to make them more efficient.

Last month, the Border and Transportation Security Directorate struck a deal with the E.U. that lets DHS obtain the names and other information of passengers boarding U.S.-bound planes. The database not only displays passport information but also data from Web sites travelers used to book their flights.

New high-tech passports will improve security for travelers from Western Europe and other low-risk countries who can visit the United States for up to 90 days without obtaining visas. The House passed legislation to extend the deadline for those countries to issue the passports to October 2005.

Verdery said, despite complications and inconveniences, there are success stories.

The US-VISIT program, a web of security checkpoints that matches a traveler's information at departure and arrival, has blocked "196 known or suspected criminals from entering the country," Verdery said. "Catching them before they take off is critical."

Patricia Friend, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants, protested that, while much has been done to improve ground security, flight attendants remain poorly trained to fight terrorists aboard airplanes.

"Unbelievably, almost three years after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, we still have not been trained to appropriately handle a security crisis on board our airplanes," said Friend, who called the security flaw "one crucial link missing."

Friend also said that new legislation made enhanced training optional instead of mandatory when it became a victim of "last minute, back-room legislative machinations." She suggested random audits to discover if flight attendants believe they are well trained.

Friend said that, because the federal government has not agreed to pay for training, airlines may try to get around it by providing employees with study packets, which could be harmful if stolen by terrorists.

"I feel that that's shocking," said Rep. Janice D. Schakowsky, D-Ill., noting not every flight carries an armed pilot or air marshal. "That would be in my view, and in the view of the traveling public, outrageous."

Verdery agreed that there's more to be done, saying flight attendants "are a line of defense."