

BACKGROUND: The U.S. Department of Commerce’s Office of Travel and Tourism Industries (OTTI) conducts important research on international travel. This research is used by the federal government to determine our nation’s balance of trade in travel, and is also used by state travel offices and city convention and visitor bureaus to guide their efforts in promoting international travel to their respective destinations. Without this information from the In-Flight Survey, state, regional and local travel destinations would be unable to accurately target their limited dollars in order to promote inbound international travel.

The bulk of the limited resources at OTTI are dedicated toward the Survey of International Air Travelers – known more commonly as the In-Flight Survey. This research program surveys air travelers on flights to and from the United States, and is the only source of original data produced by the federal government on international air travel. It provides detailed information on international visitors’ length of stay, places visited, level of spending and activities during their stay. This data is used by the federal government to help calculate the impact international travel has on our economy, and is used to measure our nation’s balance of trade in international travel – one of America’s leading service exports.

As a result of limited funding for this program over the past several years, and due to increased costs in conducting the research, many fewer surveys were distributed, collected and processed than would ideally occur. Just a few years ago the sample size for the In-Flight Survey decreased to the point that many cities and states did not find the data to be reliable.

Fortunately, there has been a modest increase in funding for this program recently. Current total annual funding for the In-Flight Survey is approximately \$1.5 million, with approximately 20 percent of that total resulting from research subscriber fees. OTTI is also experimenting with distributing and collecting a shorter version of the survey electronically through on-line travel agencies, which dramatically lowers the cost and has shown promising results. While other data sources can supplement the In-Flight Survey, nothing exists that can replace it, and support for the program at the Commerce Department and by Congressional appropriators is critical.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Provide Additional Funding for the Survey of International Air Travelers:** A boost in funding for this modest research program would improve the government’s understanding of travel’s economic impact, improve U.S. marketing capabilities and attract more subscribers and subscriber revenue from states and cities. Some of this additional funding could be directed to redesign and improve the survey questionnaire, which was last updated in 1996.

Action Item:

- The new Administration should work with Congress to double the current funding levels for the Survey of International Air Travelers (approximately \$2.5 million), which would bring the program close to its goal of surveying 1 percent of all international air travelers.

2. **Ensure Cooperation from DHS on Vital Traveler Data:** As the U.S. government moves away from paper travel documents (e.g. elimination of the paper I-94 form), the Administration should work to ensure that vital travel destination information needed by the Commerce Department is captured and delivered electronically, as well as expanded to capture more information on destinations visited by foreign visitors to the United States.

Action Items:

- Ensure that vital traveler data contained in the I-94 documents – or other appropriate electronic records – is retained and directed to the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries as paper records are eliminated and substituted with electronic forms.
- DHS should expand the destination information captured in these records in order to more accurately record the cities and states visited by foreign travelers in the United States. This can be achieved by asking international travelers to list up to three or four cities/states they intend to visit during their trip in the U.S.