

Enable Targeted Professionals and Tourists to Visit and Work in Washington State

POLICY FACTSHEET

Why it matters to WASHINGTON

International tourism is our state's second largest services export (after software), generating around \$4 billion annually.³ International tourists represent 8.2 percent of Seattle's total visitors, and those tourists spent \$6.8 billion.⁴ With international tourists spending an average of five times more than domestic tourists, increasing international tourism drives economic growth and creates local jobs.¹

Many Washington businesses rely on high-demand foreign workers to fill vacant positions they cannot fill with U.S. citizens, but visa barriers establish unnecessary obstacles and delays. In particular, limitations on H-1B visas prevent Washington employers from filling vacant job roles with qualified foreign employees, while limitations on the H-2A visa program for temporary agricultural workers prevent Washington farms from quickly hiring the employees they need to harvest crops or tend to livestock.

To facilitate the growth in tourism and business travel and meet the Port of Seattle's goal of doubling the number of international flights and destinations in the next 25 years, we need an International Arrivals Facility that can handle the influx of international passengers and present a welcoming door to our region.

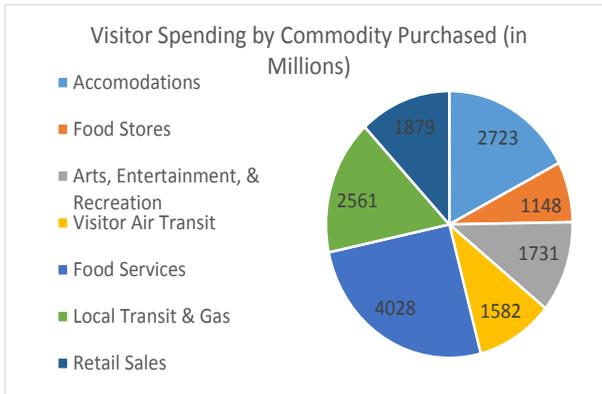
FAST FACTS:

2.25 million international Sea-Tac Airport passengers⁵

\$4.7 billion total Washington tourism employee wages⁴

154,500 tourism jobs in Washington⁴

50,000 jobs in Washington will go unfilled by 2017, 90% of which are in STEM & health care⁵



Seattle Center in the summer, a tourist hub

Policy Recommendations

Pass Travel Visa Reform:

The Jobs Originated Through Launching Travel (JOLT) Act, which was re-introduced in 2015, would make important reforms. It would:

- Expand the highly successful Visa Waiver Program (VWP) that enables pre-screened, pre-approved travelers from participating countries to travel to the U.S. for 90 days without a visa;
- Expand the Global Entry Program that expedites entry for preapproved, low-risk international travelers;
- Mandate expedited visa processing and reduced visa wait times;
- Facilitate the use of secure video conferencing to conduct visa interviews by authorizing a pilot program to test feasibility

Pass Worker Visa Reform:

Increasing the caps on H1-B visas for skilled foreign employees and H-2A visas for agricultural workers would enable Washington employers to quickly fill vacant positions they need to remain competitive. If current visa policies do not change, by 2018 the U.S. will face a shortage of 220,000 STEM workers.⁶ Currently manufacturers cannot fill 600,000 open positions.⁶ These limitations severely limit Washington employers' ability to innovate and expand. Likewise, as Washington's agricultural output and demand for exports grow, so will the need for agricultural workers. The current H-2A policy cannot keep pace with that demand, hampering our ability to increase our agricultural efficiency and competitiveness.

Increase Investments in the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport:

The Sea-Tac Airport has the potential to continue its rapid growth as a global tourist hub if it can expand its capacity. The intercontinental passenger traffic increased 80% and international passenger traffic increased 45% since 2009, reaching 2.25 million international passengers in 2014.² However, current investments in facilities will not be enough to accommodate the influx of 66 million passengers projected to use Sea-Tac annually within 20 years. We must invest in expanding the capacity of the Sea-Tac International Arrivals Facility.

POLICY FAQs

1. Will the reforms lower U.S. security? No. Although the wait time will decrease due to increased efficiency, applicants will be screened with same level of scrutiny. For instance, Visa Waiver Program (VWP) travelers are checked against multiple law enforcement and security databases before arrival, and VWP countries are required to share information about known or suspected terrorists or criminals with the U.S. and allow U.S. inspection of their security standards. International travel to the U.S. can be increased without putting our homeland security at risk.⁷

2. Will foreign workers compete with American workers? No, even if every single American STEM graduate finds a job, there still will be more than 220,000 vacant jobs by 2018.⁶ Currently there are 25,000 acute unfilled jobs in Washington.⁶ Immigrants often work in ways that complement rather than compete with American workers.

3. Why are immigrants good for our economy? Foreign workers are more than twice as likely than a U.S.-born citizen to start a new business. In fact, immigrants started 28% of all new U.S. businesses in 2011, despite only making up 12.9% of the population.⁶

4. Why is growing international leisure and business travel important? Travel is the number one U.S. services export. If the VWP were expanded to include countries such as Brazil, Israel, Poland and select other countries, it would add nearly \$11 billion to the U.S. economy and support 61,000 additional U.S. jobs.⁸ In addition, increasing international tourism enhances U.S. national security interests: international visitors to the U.S. are 74% more likely to have a favorable view of the U.S. and 61% more likely to support U.S. policies.⁸



Mount Rainier, a top tourist destination, in the summer

⁷ Task Force on Travel & Competitiveness, "National Travel & Tourism Strategy," 2012 | ⁸ U.S. Travel Association

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BACKGROUND

It's easy to understand why Washington state is an international hub for business and tourism. We are home to leading global brands, world-class ports, and stunning natural beauty that draws tens of millions of tourists each year. Yet, limitations on the current U.S. visa system and lack of investment in infrastructure and tourism promotion prevent us from reaching our full potential.

The U.S. has not been able to keep up with our share of global tourism growth. The number of international tourists to the U.S. has decreased from 2000 to 2010, even as international tourism has grown in other countries, costing us \$509 billion in lost spending and 441,000 in lost tourism jobs.¹

In addition, the current U.S. visa system has failed to keep up with U.S. employers' need to fill vacancies with foreign employees when they cannot fill the roles with American workers, especially in STEM or agricultural roles. Congress needs to pass travel and worker visa reforms to streamline the visa process and eliminate unproductive barriers that prevent vetted, low-risk workers and tourists from visiting the U.S.

In addition, our region needs to invest in the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport's International Arrivals Facility. Sea-Tac is one of the fastest growing airports in the world with international passenger traffic growing 45% since 2009², but the current facility cannot keep pace with this rapid growth.

¹ U.S. Travel Association, Brand USA: Working for All of Us, 2014 | ² Port of Seattle