

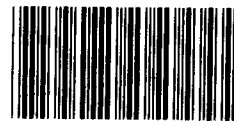
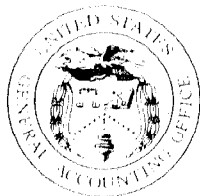
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on Foreign Committee and Tourism,
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation, U.S. Senate

March 1991

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Easing Foreign Visitors' Arrivals at U.S. Airports



143331



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

National Security and
International Affairs Division

B-240461

March 8, 1991

The Honorable John D. Rockefeller IV
Chairman, Subcommittee on Foreign
Commerce and Tourism
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation
United States Senate

Dear Senator Rockefeller:

As you requested, we reviewed the issues and conditions affecting the speed and ease of entry of foreign visitors at U.S. international airports and specific conditions at 13 of the 15 largest U.S. airports. In particular, we reviewed (1) the federal inspection process, (2) airport services and facilities, and (3) projects to improve visitor facilitation.

We are sending copies of this report to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation; the Chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce; the Chairmen, House and Senate Committees on Appropriations; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. Copies will be made available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 275-4812 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Appendix I lists the major contributors to this report.

Sincerely yours,

Allan I. Mendelowitz, Director
International Trade, Energy,
and Finance Issues

Executive Summary

Purpose

The number of foreign visitors to the United States has grown significantly in recent years, and foreign tourism has become a major U.S. industry. In 1989, receipts generated from foreign visitors to the United States—approximately \$43.8 billion—exceeded receipts gained from any U.S. export. However, airline officials and others have reported that foreign visitors' arrivals at U.S. international airports are burdened with lengthy entrance procedures and inadequate foreign visitor-oriented services and facilities.

At the request of the Chairman of the Foreign Commerce and Tourism Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and other members of Congress, GAO reviewed the issues and conditions that affect the speed and ease with which a foreign visitor can gain entry into the United States and the particular conditions at some of the largest U.S. international gateway airports. More specifically, GAO examined (1) the federal inspection process, (2) airport services and facilities, and (3) projects to improve visitor facilitation. The airports included in GAO's review are listed in table 1.1.

Background

An estimated 23 million foreign visitors arrived in the United States by air in 1989. While there are over 400 primary airports (public-use commercial airports that serve at least 10,000 passengers annually) in the United States, the 13 airports GAO reviewed handled about 65 percent of all international air passenger arrivals in 1989. The federal inspection services are responsible for clearing travelers and products entering the United States and include the following agencies: the Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization Service; the Treasury Department's U.S. Customs Service; the Health and Human Services Department's Public Health Service; the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service; and the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Results in Brief

The International Civil Aviation Organization has a worldwide goal of allowing only 45 minutes to pass from the time a plane lands until all passengers are cleared through the federal inspection process. However, at the 13 airports GAO reviewed, routine processing times significantly exceeded this goal during peak times, according to federal inspectors and airport authorities.

All of the airports reviewed provided basic services, including ground transportation, some type of translation service, lodging information,

directional and informational signs, baggage carts, and currency exchange. However, the quality and extent of the services supplied varied. Further, federal inspectors at 12 of the 13 airports GAO reviewed considered airport facilities inadequate.

Various projects are planned, underway, or have been recently completed to improve visitor facilitation. In addition, individuals and organizations concerned with easing visitors' arrivals at U.S. airports have proposed actions to aid the federal inspection clearance process, such as allowing U.S. citizens to bypass Immigration inspection and raising additional funds by eliminating user fee exemptions.

Principal Findings

The Federal Inspection Process Is Slow

The International Civil Aviation Organization has recommended 45 minutes as the maximum tolerable time that federal inspection services should allot from arrival to clearance of all arriving air passengers. According to federal inspectors, processing times have usually ranged from 1 to 3 hours during peak times at airports GAO reviewed. Moreover, airport authorities and others have stated that processing has taken as much as 4 or 5 hours during peak times at three of these airports.

The federal inspection services have made efforts to meet their objective of rapid clearance of international passengers. For example, Customs has begun to implement the Master Plan for the 1990s, under which Customs selectively inspects passengers so that the majority of them spend little or no time in Customs. However, there are other proposals and options that the federal inspection services have not implemented but that could aid in clearing international passengers. Proposals made by organizations and individuals concerned with foreign tourism include (1) reinstating the use of the U.S. citizens bypass system to decrease Immigration's inspection work load and (2) eliminating exemptions from user fees for travelers from Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean to give Immigration and Customs more funds to improve their capabilities.

Airport Services and Facilities Vary

Most of the airports GAO visited had a wide range of basic services to help foreign visitors. However, the ready accessibility and quality of those services varied widely. Ten of the airports GAO visited have directional and information signs in one or more foreign languages; nearly all

of the airports have baggage carts in the federal inspection area that often can be used throughout the terminal (though usually for a charge of \$1 or more); 12 airports offer full-time translation services; all but 1 of the airports have information booths for foreign visitors; and all 13 of the airports provide lodging information, currency exchange services, and ground transportation services.

The Commerce Department's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration administers a Gateway Receptionist Program for foreign visitors. The program employs college students with foreign language skills as translators who assist foreign visitors who speak little or no English and help in the federal inspection process. The program operates at only seven of the airports GAO reviewed.

Adequate airport facilities, including the federal inspection area, holding areas, and luggage carousels, are critical to foreign visitor facilitation. However, at most of the airports GAO visited, federal inspection areas are too small or poorly configured for efficient Customs and/or Immigration operations, according to federal inspection officials. Many of the airports do not have enough luggage carousels or adequate holding areas for passengers waiting to be cleared by federal inspectors. Further, seven of the airports do not have transit lounges for international passengers making connecting flights.

Projects to Improve Visitor Facilitation Are Underway

Three entities are involved in foreign visitor facilitation—airport authorities, federal inspection services, and airlines. All three entities contribute to the problems that affect international travelers. Delays are due to inadequate airport facilities, insufficient federal inspection services resources and staff, and the airlines' tendency to schedule many planes to arrive at an airport at approximately the same time. In 1984, the Department of Transportation established the National Transportation Facilitation Committee, composed of government and private sector representatives, to coordinate the development, implementation, and conduct of programs that affect the movement of passengers and cargo through U.S. international airports, seaports, and land ports. The Committee has focused primarily on the federal inspection services. In 1990 it published "Guidelines For Federal Inspection Facilities at Airports" to help provide the best possible federal inspection facilities at U.S. international airports. However, the Committee has not developed similar guidance on improving other airport facilities or services.

In addition, the following projects are underway:

- Renovations or new facilities are planned, under construction, or were recently completed at all the airports GAO reviewed.
- The Department of Transportation is pursuing an “open skies” policy, which would allow an unlimited number of flights from an eligible country to land at any U.S. international airport rather than at overburdened airports.
- The Department of State is testing a visa waiver program that allows citizens of eight designated countries simply to complete an Immigration information form at the airport or enroute instead of having to obtain a visa abroad.
- Customs and Immigration are using preclearance and preinspection programs, involving a partial or full inspection of passengers and their baggage at foreign ports by U.S. federal inspectors at selected foreign airports before leaving for the United States.
- Increased automation, such as machine-readable documents and automated baggage inspection, is reducing processing time at some airports.

Recommendations

GAO recommends that, consistent with Commerce’s responsibility for promoting tourism, the Secretary of Commerce

- work with other Department heads to speed the clearance process for arriving international air passengers. This effort should include consideration of proposals for (1) reinstating the U.S. citizens bypass system at all airports to ease Immigration’s work load and (2) seeking the removal of user fee exemptions in order to provide more funds to Immigration and Customs and
- direct the head of the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration to consider expanding its Gateway Receptionist Program.

GAO also recommends that the Secretary of Transportation request that the National Transportation Facilitation Committee design a comprehensive model plan for providing quality airport services and facilities for foreign visitors and that this model plan be completed within 12 months.

Agency Comments

As requested, GAO did not obtain formal agency comments on a draft of this report. However, its contents were discussed with agency officials, and their views have been incorporated where appropriate.

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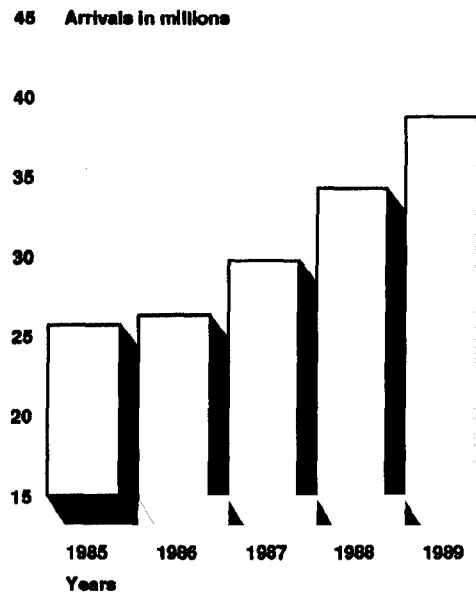
GAO	General Accounting Office
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
NTFC	National Transportation Facilitation Committee
USTTA	U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration

Introduction

Background

There has been tremendous growth in the number of foreign visitors¹ to the United States since 1985. The Department of Commerce's U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration (USTTA) reports that since that year, the number of foreign visitors to the United States has grown about 50 percent (see fig. 1.1). Approximately 39 million foreign visitors came to the United States during 1989, according to USTTA, and it forecasts that by the year 2000 the number of foreign visitors will increase by about 75 percent of the 1989 figure. Most of the visitors who arrived in the United States by air in 1989 entered through 13 major U.S. airports (see table 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Number of Foreign Visitors to the United States, 1985-1989



Notes: Foreign visitors include arrivals by land, sea, and air. The figure for 1989 is an estimate.
Source: U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, June 1990.

¹Foreign visitors are non-U.S. citizens who come to the United States for more than 24 hours but less than 1 year, for the purpose of business or tourism or for other reasons.

Table 1.1: 13 Major U.S. Airports and Number of Entering Foreign Visitors, 1989

Airports	Foreign visitors	Percent of total
John F. Kennedy International Airport (New York)	4,942,400	22
Miami International Airport	2,610,400	11
Los Angeles International Airport	2,013,200	9
Honolulu International Airport	1,415,900	6
San Francisco International Airport	805,800	4
O'Hare International Airport (Chicago)	632,600	3
Orlando International Airport	509,000	2
Houston Intercontinental Airport	505,600	2
Logan International Airport (Boston)	474,300	2
Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport	340,400	1
Newark International Airport	299,100	1
Atlanta International Airport	274,600	1
Seattle-Tacoma International Airport	274,600	1
Total foreign visitors, 13 airports	15,097,900	65
Total foreign visitors, all U.S. airports	22,724,900	100

Notes: Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred. Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Of all foreign visitors to the United States in 1989, approximately 63 percent came from Canada and Mexico. Other leading country origins of visitors to the United States in 1989 included Japan, the United Kingdom, West Germany, South America, France, Australia, Italy, and the Netherlands (see table 1.2). Foreign visitors spent an estimated \$43.8 billion in the United States in 1989, including international payments to U.S. carriers (see fig. 1.2).

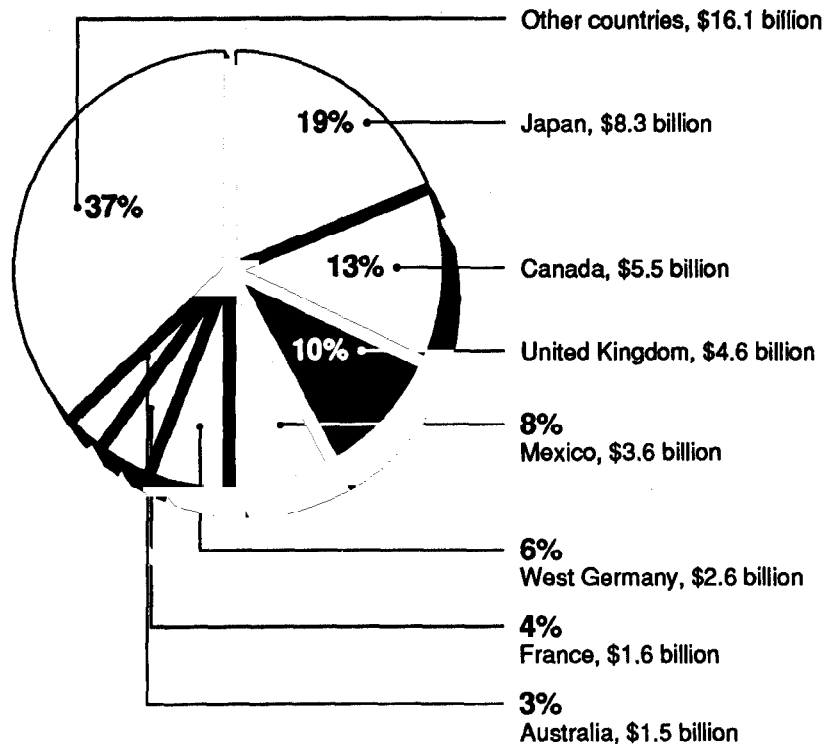
**Table 1.2: Country Origin of Foreign
Visitors to the United States, 1989**

Country	Visitors (Numbers in millions)
Canada	15.4
Mexico	9.3
Japan	3.1
United Kingdom	2.2
West Germany	1.1
South America	1.1
France	0.7
Australia	0.4
Italy	0.4
The Netherlands	0.3
Other	5.0
Total	39.0

Note: Figures include arrivals by land, sea, and air.

Source: U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, June 1990.

Figure 1.2: Sources of U.S. International Travel Receipts, 1989 Estimates



Total: \$43.8 billion (including international payments to U.S. carriers).
Source: U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, June 1990.

Several factors have contributed to the growth of foreign tourism in the United States, including the following:

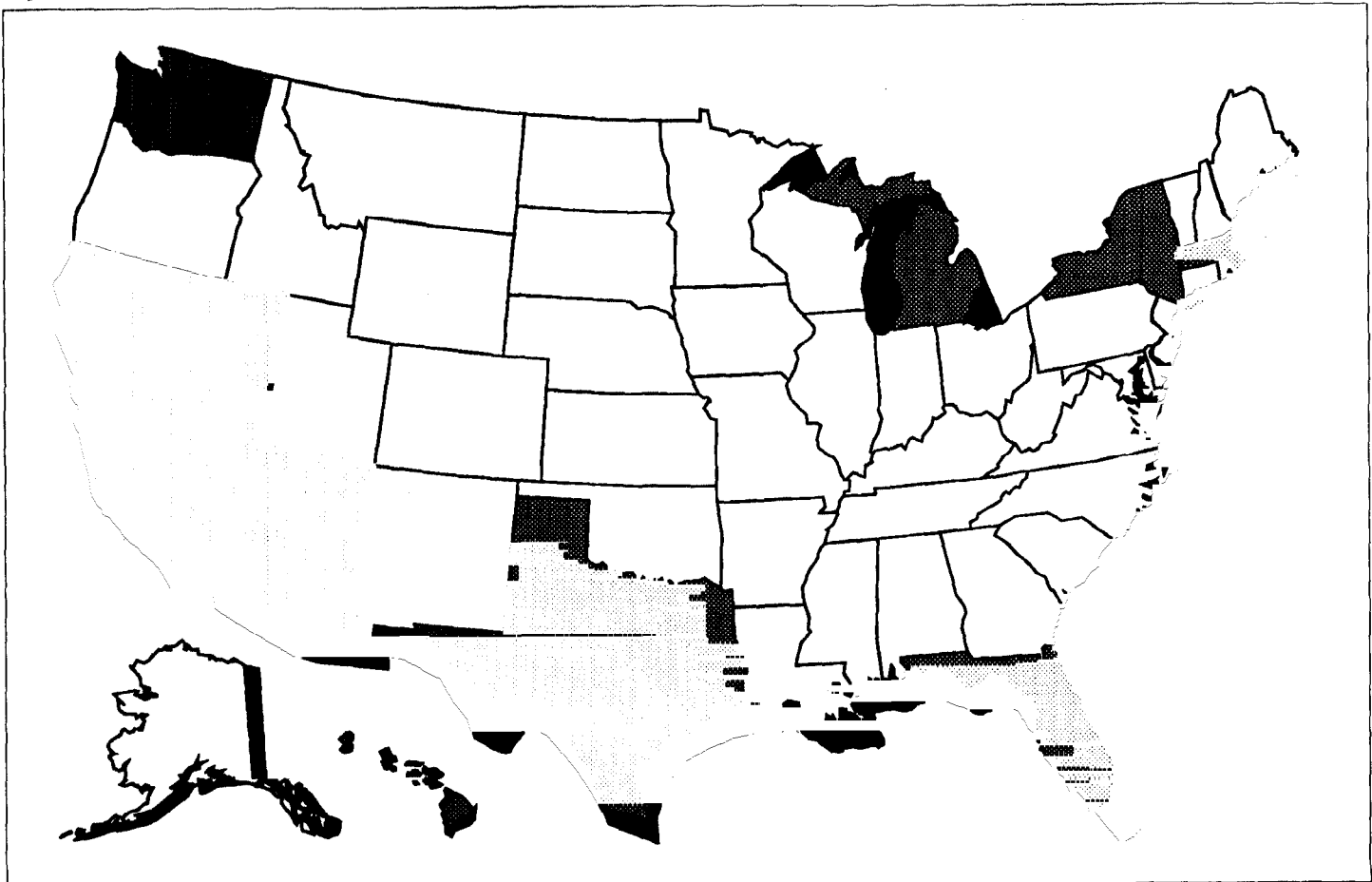
- the strength of foreign currencies against the dollar, making the United States a “better buy” for foreign tourists;
- the increasing affluence of many countries in Eastern Asia and Western Europe, which has permitted citizens of those countries the luxury of foreign travel; and
- the opening of borders and lifting of travel restrictions in the former Eastern Bloc countries, which has allowed their citizens greater freedom to travel.

Foreign tourism provides many economic benefits to the United States. According to USTTA, foreign visitors generated estimated revenues of \$43.8 billion in 1989—more than the leading U.S. exports, including agricultural goods (\$41.4 billion); chemicals (\$36.5 billion); and motor

vehicles/parts (\$34.6 billion). USTTA also reported that in 1989, foreign travelers to the United States directly supported an estimated 564,000 U.S. jobs and generated \$4 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues.

The top 10 states receiving the most foreign visitors in 1989 were California, New York, Texas, Florida, Hawaii, Washington, Arizona, Nevada, Michigan, and Massachusetts (see fig. 1.3). Washington, D.C., received approximately the same number of foreign visitors (1.4 million) as the tenth most visited state, Massachusetts.

Figure 1.3: Top 10 States Receiving Most Foreign Visitors (by Land, Sea, and Air at First Point of Entry), 1989 Estimates



Source: U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, June 1990.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

At the request of the Chairman, Subcommittee on Foreign Commerce and Tourism of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, we reviewed the issues and conditions that affect the speed and ease with which a foreign visitor can gain entry into the United States and particular conditions at 13 of the 15 largest U.S. international gateway airports. Our objectives were to review (1) the federal inspection process, (2) airport services and facilities, and (3) projects to improve visitor facilitation.

During the course of our review, we testified on this subject before the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Commerce and Tourism.²

We visited 13 U.S. international gateway airports to observe conditions at the airports. These were John F. Kennedy International Airport (New York); Miami International Airport; Los Angeles International Airport; Honolulu International Airport; San Francisco International Airport; O'Hare International Airport (Chicago); Orlando International Airport; Houston Intercontinental Airport; Logan International Airport (Boston); Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport; Newark International Airport; Atlanta International Airport; and Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. We also met with airport authorities as well as with federal inspection service officials at each of the airports.

We interviewed agency officials involved in foreign visitor facilitation at the U.S. Customs Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Department of Agriculture, the Public Health Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of State. In addition, we met with officials representing various private organizations concerned with foreign tourism, including the Air Transport Association, the Airport Operators Council International, the American Society of Travel Agents, the National Air Carriers Association, and the Travel Industry Association. We also reviewed various laws and conventions related to visitor facilitation. We did not evaluate the performance or policies of the federal inspection services or of any other related agency.

As requested, we did not obtain official agency comments on this report. However, we discussed the information in this report with cognizant agency officials and have incorporated their comments in the report as appropriate.

²Foreign Visitor Facilitation, (GAO/T-NSIAD-90-56, July 18, 1990).

Chapter 1
Introduction

We performed our review from January 1990 to September 1990 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

The Federal Inspection Process

The International Civil Aviation Organization and the House Committee on Ways and Means have advocated establishing a 45-minute goal as the maximum time for federal inspectors to clear arriving international passengers. However, clearance times generally have ranged from 1 to 3 hours or more during peak times at airports we visited. Although the federal inspection services have made efforts to speed up processing and clear passengers more efficiently, the Airport Operators Council International considers U.S. arrival formalities to be more complicated, onerous, and time-consuming than those of most other countries.

The federal inspection services regulate or inspect passengers, cargo, and aircraft on arrival at U.S. gateways in accordance with their inspection and enforcement objectives. A further objective, visitor facilitation, was established in the 1944 Convention on International Civil Aviation. In that convention, participating governments, including the United States, agreed to adopt all practical measures to facilitate and expedite air transportation and, specifically, to establish rapid customs and immigration clearance procedures. In addition, provisions of the International Civil Aviation Organization's annex 9 to the convention are aimed at reducing formalities and documentation requirements and achieving the rapid clearance of international passengers and cargo.

Each of the five agencies involved in the federal inspection clearance process has different responsibilities. The agencies are the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the U.S. Customs Service, the Public Health Service, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Typically, incoming passengers first go through INS to have their travel papers reviewed and stamped, and then they pick up their luggage and take it to Customs for inspection. Passengers who appear to have a contagious disease or other illness may be subject to inspection under Public Health Service regulations, and passengers carrying plants or animals must go through an Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service review. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as part of the Customs inspection, is authorized to inspect any package, crate, or other container to protect against illegal trafficking in protected fish, wildlife, and plants, or products (such as ivory jewelry) made from endangered species.

Immigration and Naturalization Service

INS inspects the travel documents of every traveler who arrives on an international flight, including all foreign visitors and returning U.S. citizens. About 49 percent of people entering the country at the airports we reviewed were returning U.S. citizens. Between 1978 and 1989, INS

speeded up the inspection process by using a "citizens bypass system," under which it did not have to inspect the travel documents of returning U.S. citizens. However, INS suspended the citizens bypass system because agency officials considered it inconsistent with INS enforcement objectives. As a result, the INS' work load expanded beyond increases due to the growth in foreign tourism.

INS has been able to handle this increased work load, however, because it has tripled its staff since 1987, according to INS officials. INS has financed the added staff and overtime with the proceeds from a user fee of \$5 per passenger. This fee is charged on all international airline and oceanliner tickets, except those of passengers arriving from Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean. (In 1989, about 15 million visitors arrived in the United States by sea or air from Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean.) Nevertheless, despite the growth in INS staff, airport managers considered INS staffing inadequate at a number of airports.

Federal inspectors at the airports we visited said that processing times have generally ranged from 1 to 3 hours during peak travel times. However, at three of these airports, processing arriving passengers took as long as 4 or 5 hours during peak times, according to airport authorities and others. A 1990 Airport Operators Council International survey of inspection services and passenger facilitation at selected U.S. international airports found that passengers were sometimes held on board aircraft for as long as 5 hours during the traffic peak (from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.) at one airport. During this time, only 14 to 16 of that airport's 20 INS primary inspection booths were staffed. Airline and airport officials cited another example of INS delays: Passengers on a Swissair flight that landed at a major U.S. international airport in July of 1990 after a flight from Zurich waited 5 hours to be cleared by overburdened INS inspectors.

U.S. Customs Service

Customs' work load has also increased over the past few years due to the growth in foreign tourism, but the number of Customs staff at international airports has remained relatively constant. While an additional \$5-per-passenger user fee has been added to the cost of tickets to fund Customs' services, until recently Customs has not been able to directly access the fees to increase its staff, according to Customs officials.¹

¹ Recently passed legislation now gives Customs direct access to a portion of its user fee to increase staff.

To deal with the increase in its work load without a commensurate increase in staff, Customs has been implementing its Master Plan for the 1990s, under which it selectively inspects only passengers who meet a profile it has developed of people most likely to be carrying contraband or violating other laws. This screening allows about 90 percent of the passengers to spend little or no time in Customs, according to Customs officials. Customs' Master Plan has been fully implemented at 20 airports, including all 13 of the airports we reviewed. Customs officials stated that the amount of contraband confiscated at these airports has not decreased since Customs began selectively inspecting passengers.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Public Health Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In most cases, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and the Public Health Service do not cause delays in passenger processing. Relatively few passengers are subject to inspections by these two services. However, in situations where these inspections are necessary, significant delays may occur. For example, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service inspects arriving passengers and their baggage at Los Angeles International Airport more closely than at most other airports because of the high risk of damage from foreign pests to California agriculture. U.S. Fish and Wildlife reviews are conducted in tandem with Customs inspections, either by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife officer (at the 10 largest U.S. airports), or by a Customs inspector.

Proposals to Aid the Federal Inspection Process

Airline and airport industry groups and others have proposed some actions that the federal inspection services could take to aid in clearing international passengers. One such proposal is to use the U.S. citizens bypass system at all airports to decrease Immigration's inspection work load. But some INS officials question whether the citizens bypass system should be used: They believe it is inconsistent with INS enforcement objectives. Another option, supported by INS and Customs officials, is for INS and Customs to seek to eliminate exemptions from user fees for travelers from Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean. By eliminating the exemptions, INS and Customs could each add approximately \$75 million to their annual budgets, hire more inspectors, and presumably improve their processing capabilities.

Airport Services and Facilities

The quality and extent of airport services varied considerably among the airports we visited. Further, airport facilities were considered inadequate by federal inspectors at nearly every airport in our study. Although the National Transportation Facilitation Committee (NTFC), a government and private sector coordinating effort, has issued guidelines for federal inspection facilities, no such guidance exists for airport services and noninspection facilities.

Airport Services

The services provided at the airport before, during, and after the federal inspection process often influence how welcome a visitor feels and how quickly a visitor can reach his or her destination. Most of these services are performed by contractors or provided by the airport authority. Although all of the airports we visited provide basic passenger services, some airports' services are geared more specifically toward the needs of foreign visitors.

Signs in several languages directing visitors to the baggage claim area, into and out of the federal inspection area, and to airport services can greatly aid the flow of passengers through the airport. At 3 of the 13 airports we reviewed, signs were in English only. At four other airports, signs were in English and one foreign language, reflecting a heavy concentration of particular foreign visitors. For example, the one foreign language used for signs at Honolulu International Airport is Japanese, since a large proportion of Hawaii's foreign tourists is Japanese; at the Houston Intercontinental Airport there are signs in Spanish to accommodate Houston's many Mexican visitors. At six airports we reviewed, signs were in two or more foreign languages in addition to English. Nearly every airport we visited also had signs using international symbols. At O'Hare International Airport, one of the international terminals is testing electronic signs that can be programmed to provide information in seven different languages.

One of the major complaints users of airport services have is the lack of free baggage carts or the need to surrender the free baggage carts available in the federal inspection area upon exiting the area. While rental charges for carts are nominal, cost is not the issue. Newly arrived foreign visitors typically do not have the U.S. coins required to rent a cart. Ten of the airports we visited charge \$1 or more for carts that can be used throughout the terminal. The remaining three provide free baggage carts, however, they must be surrendered upon leaving the federal inspection area. In the latter case, travelers usually have the option of

hiring a skycap or paying (usually \$1 or more) for a cart upon leaving the federal inspection area.

Twelve of the airports in our review offer some form of full-time translation services to aid the federal inspection process or to help visitors locate and obtain services, such as hotels and transportation. One of the smaller airports hires part-time translators only during the peak foreign tourist season (summer). At some of the airports, translators are available only in the federal inspection area while others provide translation services throughout the international terminal. Translation services may be provided in person, by phone, or by a computer terminal.

Translation services at the 13 airports we reviewed ranged from a capability for communicating in 4 or 5 languages to the combined capability of communicating in 17 languages, the latter provided by translators at Miami International Airport. In addition, a Gateway Receptionist Program operates year-round at seven of the airports we reviewed. The program, which began at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport 20 years ago, is funded by USTTA and work study grants from the Department of Education. It employs college students with foreign language skills to assist foreign visitors who speak little or no English and to help the inspection services. Participants in the program are also given training in all aspects of airport management.

Several airports provide multilingual video tapes to airlines to show in flight that describe the federal inspection process to arriving international passengers. Some airlines have even produced their own video tapes explaining the federal inspection process.

All but one of the airports we reviewed have foreign tourist information booths, most of which provide maps; brochures on popular local attractions; and lodging, dining, and transportation information. At least eight of the airports provide some type of information printed in one or more languages other than English. For example, John F. Kennedy International Airport provides a guide to the airport in several languages, and Boston's Logan International Airport provides a map of that city in four languages. In addition, bilingual or multilingual staff are available at many of the 13 airports' information booths to provide assistance and information.

Of the airports we visited, all provide lodging information for those who need it—often at the foreign tourist information booths—and some provide assistance in obtaining lodging. In some cases, lodging assistance

consists of posting a hotel/motel phone board, a service that is paid for by the hotels and motels represented on the board—usually chain hotels and motels located near the airport. Unfortunately, these are not always the accommodations sought by foreign tourists, who often prefer staying in the city or near tourist attractions. Logan International Airport has a hotel reservations booth, similar to those typically found at major European airports, staffed by bilingual or multilingual people who make lodging recommendations for a wide range of budgets and actually book the reservations as well.

Currency exchange services are available at all of the airports we visited and generally operate when international flights arrive. Most of the currency exchange booths remain open until 30 minutes after the last international flight arrival of the day. However, passengers on the last international arrival may not be able to get to the currency exchange booth before it closes because of the time it takes for passengers to clear the federal inspection process. Further, currency exchange booths are not always conveniently located. For example, at one airport the currency exchange booth is located on the departure, rather than the arrival, level of the terminal.

Ground transportation services are provided at all of the airports we reviewed. Such services generally include buses, taxis, rental cars, airport shuttles to nearby hotels or other locations and, in some cases, rapid transit (trains or subways). At O'Hare International Airport, phone lines and a display board (in English only) provide transportation information, while Newark International Airport offers a pamphlet warning visitors in eight languages to be aware of unauthorized ground transportation.

Airport Facilities

Airport facilities generally include holding areas for international passengers making connecting flights or waiting to be cleared by federal inspectors; luggage carousels; and the federal inspection area. Such facilities are key to the issue of visitor facilitation. Although NTFC has published guidelines for airports on providing adequate federal inspection facilities in terms of size, configuration, and so forth, there are problems with federal inspection and other facilities at most of the airports we visited.

Some of the airports we visited have inadequate holding capacity for arriving international passengers awaiting clearance by Immigration and Customs, and seven of the airports we visited do not have a transit

lounge. Consequently, airlines often must keep passengers on the plane if there are backups in the clearance process or flight delays. This circumstance costs the airlines money, since it decreases the use of planes and usually leaves passengers irritated and frustrated.

Late delivery of luggage, too few luggage handlers, and/or too few or too small luggage carousels cause passenger delays in obtaining luggage and proceeding to Customs. Although passengers ordinarily pick up their luggage after clearing Immigration, at some airports they now must carry their luggage through Immigration and on to Customs.

Federal inspection officials consider federal inspection facilities inadequate for efficient operations at all but one of the airports we reviewed. These officials believe that too small or poorly configured inspection areas adversely affect efficient Customs and/or Immigration operations. For example, Honolulu International Airport's federal inspection area is small relative to the 4,000-6,000 passengers arriving during the daily peak period (5:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.). As a result, passengers must be held at the gate waiting for the Immigration area to clear and then stand in long lines to go through the entire federal inspection process. Airport officials told us that this problem will be partially resolved with the completion of Honolulu's new international terminal, scheduled to open in 1993.

However, expanding or improving facilities does not always solve the problems. For example, Newark International Airport opened new inspection facilities, including 20 primary Immigration booths, in June 1989 at a cost of \$11 million. Anticipating a significant increase in traffic, an additional \$3.5 million was spent to improve the Customs area, and the airport authority made space available for another six booths in the Immigration area. However, Immigration frequently cannot staff all the existing booths due to staffing shortages.

Projects to Improve Visitor Facilitation

There are three entities that have a major impact on foreign visitor facilitation—airport authorities, the federal inspection services, and airlines. These entities all recognize visitor facilitation is not carried out as quickly and efficiently as it should be, but each views the source of the problem differently.

- Airport authorities cite peaking¹ and inefficient federal inspection services.
- Federal inspection services cite peaking and inadequate airport facilities.
- Airlines maintain that they are bound by customer demand and that airports and federal inspectors are unable or unwilling to meet these demands.

There is no single cause of the problems faced by international travelers. The responsibility is shared by federal agencies, airlines, and airport authorities, and they must all be involved in finding and implementing solutions. However, current federal budget constraints hamper increased funding for the federal inspection services. Some of the projects planned, underway, or proposed to improve visitor facilitation are discussed on the following pages.

The National Transportation Facilitation Committee

No single agency or group has sole authority over the actions and policies of the entities involved with visitor facilitation. However, the Department of Transportation coordinates the NTFC, which was formed in 1984 to advocate positions and encourage the development and implementation of new ideas to improve visitor facilitation. Members of the NTFC include the Airport Operators Council International, the National Air Carriers Association, the Air Transport Association, USTTA, and all of the federal inspection services.

The NTFC has been focusing primarily on ways to improve the federal inspection process. Accordingly, in 1990 the Federal Inspection Services Facilities Guideline Committee of the NTFC published its "Guidelines For Federal Inspection Facilities at Airports," a model plan for providing the best possible federal inspection facilities at international airports. NTFC's

¹"Peaking" is the arrival of many airplanes within a narrow time period. Peaking problems are the result of various factors, including weather-related delays, restrictions resulting from noise and pollution control regulations, passenger flight time preferences, and the need to meet connecting flights.

guidelines deal with federal inspection services facilities design requirements and include guidance on baggage and passenger flow and inspection sequences for regular stateside inspections as well as for preinspections and preclearances conducted at non-U.S. airports. However, NTFC has not developed any guidelines on providing the best possible airport services (translation services, information booths, etc.) and other facilities (baggage carousels, transit lounges, etc.) at U.S. international gateway airports. Officials at USTTA and NTFC believe that such guidelines would be very useful to airports and that NTFC is the appropriate and logical organization to develop and disseminate this guidance. NTFC members we spoke to stated that the committee should be able to complete a model plan for providing quality airport services and facilities in about 12 months.

Airport Expansion Projects

At all of the 13 airports we reviewed, renovations or new facilities are either planned, under construction, or have recently been completed to increase capacity and allow for more efficient federal inspection processing. However, some of the projects will not be completed for several years. Expansion projects may include plans for new or larger terminals with more gates and newly designed, more spacious federal inspection areas. In addition, nearly every expansion project expects to increase the number of luggage carousels in the federal inspection area.

Landing Rights

The Department of Transportation has proposed "open skies" agreements with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, which would allow an unlimited number of flights from those countries to land at any U.S. international airport. This proposal is designed to reduce congestion at the most heavily trafficked international airports by encouraging the routing of incoming international traffic to lesser-used airports and new hubs. However, INS and Customs are concerned about their ability to meet staffing needs at airports that would receive more international traffic under an open skies policy.

The Visa Waiver Program

The Department of State is testing a visa waiver program. This 3-year pilot program, which ends in 1992, allows passengers from eight² designated countries simply to complete an INS information form at the arrival airport or enroute instead of having to obtain a visa abroad.

²Countries currently participating in the visa waiver program are Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany, Sweden, Italy, and the Netherlands.

Countries with high rates of traffic to the United States and a low risk of immigration violations, based on historical experience, were selected for visa waivers. The visa waiver program may encourage people to visit the United States, facilitate entry for foreign visitors participating in the program, and reduce the State Department's work load. However, it does not lessen the INS' work load or processing time, according to some INS and airport officials, since the travel document (the visa waiver form) must still be inspected.

Preclearance and Preinspection

The federal inspection services are using preclearance and preinspection programs to reduce their processing work load at major airports and to aid the entry of foreign tourists. Preclearance is the full inspection of passengers and their baggage at foreign airports by U.S. federal inspectors. Currently, there are preclearance ports in Canada, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. Generally, precleared passengers can enter the United States without undergoing any other checks by federal inspectors at U.S. ports of entry and may even arrive at domestic, rather than international, airports.

Preinspection is a partial (INS only) inspection conducted at some Bahamian airports and at Shannon Airport in Ireland. INS is also conducting a pilot preinspection program at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in the United Kingdom.

INS officials claim that preinspection and preclearance can save time and money. If an individual is found inadmissible in the originating country rather than in the United States, the airline will refuse to allow the individual to board the plane. Thus INS will be spared detention, court, and deportation costs that would be incurred if the individual were later denied entry at a U.S. airport.

Customs has reservations, however, about expanding its preclearance operations to additional foreign locations. Customs officials believe that maintaining preclearance operations at numerous overseas locations may not be the best use of Customs' resources.

Increased Automation

Increased automation, where used, has reduced clearance and inspection processing time. For example, greater use of machine-readable travel documents and automated baggage inspections has speeded processing at some airports. However, other airports do not have the necessary equipment, such as machine readers, to make use of all the technological

innovations. Currently, about 85 percent of U.S. passports are machine readable, as are visas for foreign diplomats. Seventeen U.S. airports currently have machine readers, including all the airports we reviewed.

The Interagency Border Inspection System is a single data base query system for both INS and Customs that incorporates all of the lookouts and warnings from inspection and law enforcement agencies at the point of first contact with the passenger (Immigration). The system is currently in use at 17 airports, including the 13 airports we visited, and is scheduled to be phased in at other airports in the future.

As a means of promoting selective inspections, Customs developed the Advance Passenger Information System, a program that allows participating air carriers and foreign governments to electronically transmit information on arriving passengers to Customs. The transmitted names and dates of birth of the passengers will be automatically compared to the Interagency Border Inspection System and foreign law enforcement data bases. Because the Advance Passenger Information System will perform the query before a flight arrives, federal inspectors should be able to clear arriving passengers much more quickly. However, Customs believes it will be several years before the system will be fully implemented and will require the cooperation of all airlines and airport authorities.

Other Possible Projects

Organizations and individuals concerned with foreign tourism have suggested the following possible actions to further improve visitor facilitation:

- INS could reinstate the U.S. citizens bypass system at all airports. This system would substantially decrease the INS' inspection work load and free up resources for clearing foreign visitors.
- Exemptions from user fees for travelers from Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean could be removed to give INS and Customs more funds to improve their processing capabilities.

Conclusion

There has been significant growth in foreign tourism in recent years, and the trend is expected to continue. The fact that foreign visitors generated more revenues in 1989 than any U.S. export demonstrates how important foreign visitors are to the U.S. economy. Yet airport services and facilities are not as good as they could be at some airports, and federal inspection clearance procedures often take considerably longer than

the established goal of 45 minutes. A long and tiring trip through the clearance process is not a pleasant welcome to arriving foreign visitors, nor does it encourage their return to the United States.

Despite general acknowledgement that foreign visitor facilitation is not as good as it should be, the entities most involved with foreign visitor facilitation (the federal inspection services, the airport authorities, and the airlines), have not developed a comprehensive plan on how to resolve the problem. However, various projects are being implemented or proposed to improve visitor facilitation. One such improvement project is the formation of the NTFC, which recently developed guidelines on providing the best possible federal inspection facilities. Similar guidelines for improving airport services and noninspection facilities could provide a valuable service to airport operators and foreign visitors.

Other actions have been proposed to speed up the federal inspection clearance process. Current federal budget constraints preclude increasing funding for the federal inspection services in proportion to the growth in foreign tourism. Nonetheless, we believe the federal inspection services have an obligation to find more cost-effective ways to process passengers quickly and efficiently, in accordance with the International Civil Aviation Organization's standards.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Secretary of Commerce

- consider adopting proposals, in conjunction with the Secretaries of Treasury, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, and Interior, and the U.S. Attorney General, aimed at increasing the speed and ease of the federal inspection clearance process, such as (1) using the U.S. citizens bypass system at all airports to ease Immigration's work load and (2) seeking the removal of user fee exemptions to provide more funds to Immigration and Customs and
- direct the head of the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration to consider expanding its Gateway Receptionist Program, which benefits (1) foreign tourists who speak little or no English, (2) federal inspectors, and (3) college students who are able to make good use of their foreign language skills. Funds necessary to expand the program could be provided on a matching basis by USTTA and participating airport authorities, as is now done at most participating airports.

To encourage high-quality, foreign visitor-oriented services and facilities at all U.S. international airports, we also recommend that the Secretary

of Transportation request that the National Transportation Facilitation Committee design a model plan for providing quality airport services and facilities for foreign visitors, incorporating some of the more innovative projects underway at various airports, and that the plan be completed within 12 months.

Major Contributors to This Report

**National Security and
International Affairs
Division, Washington,
D.C.**

John E. Watson, Assistant Director
Roy B. Karadbil, Evaluator-in-Charge
Susanne E. Wood, Evaluator-in-Charge

Far East Office

Suzanne P. Nagy, Evaluator

Dallas Regional Office

Enrique E. Olivares, Evaluator
Joyce L. Akins, Evaluator

**Los Angeles Regional
Office**

Larry S. Thomas, Evaluator

**New York Regional
Office**

Joseph Unger, Evaluator
Danise Stewart Waugh, Evaluator

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