

Testimony for Rep. Joe Heck (R-NV)
Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration
H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and
Tourists to America Act
May 17, 2012

Chairman Gallegly and Ranking Member Lofgren:

Thank you for holding this hearing today on legislation I introduced this past fall, H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act. As you may know, I represent the Las Vegas area where travel and tourism is the main industry with hundreds of thousands of Nevada families relying on the travel and tourism as a source of jobs and income.

To give you an idea of how large the travel and tourism industry is in the United States, in 2011, the industry, which is about an \$813 billion industry, generated approximately \$1.9 trillion in total economic output. This can be directly linked to 2 million American jobs being supported by the travel industry and the exporting of \$153 million in U.S. goods. Additionally, out of every \$7 spent by travelers in the U.S., at least \$1 of that is from international travelers. As a whole, international travelers spend about \$4,300 during each visit to the U.S.

Over the past ten years, from 2000 to 2010, the travel industry has seen major growth. According to the U.S. Travel Organization, global long-haul travel

has increased by 40 percent. On the contrary, over this same ten year period, the number of travelers coming to the United States has dropped from 17 percent to 12 percent.

This decline in the number of travelers coming to the U.S. has definitely been felt nation-wide, as well as in my home state. In Nevada, more than one in ten citizens is jobless. In fact, Nevada has had the worst employment record in the country for more than a year. While across the country, the unemployment rate has remained above 8 percent for 30 months, the Unemployment rate in Nevada has continued to hover around 13 percent.

It goes without saying that America is struggling and something needs to be done to get folks back to work, and because I represent a district that is extremely reliant on the travel and tourism industry, it is for that reason that I introduced H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act.

From the data I just mentioned describing the decrease in number of travelers coming to the U.S., I do not think we can attribute this to a lack of desire to visit the United States, but more so to a cumbersome travel visa application and processing system. In the past, the State Department has posted interview wait times of more than 30 days, which exceeds its own internal goal of interviewing all visa applicants within 30 days, as well as artificially withheld the availability of interview dates. This can present major barriers for those wishing to travel to the

United States because travelers do not have an accurate idea of the timeline to get an interview or when an appropriate time to apply for a visa would be because of lack of information on historical wait times. My legislation, H.R. 3039 seeks to modernize this process in several ways.

H.R. 3039 1) mandates that the State Department implement a 12 day visa-processing standard to ensure the timely processing of visa application; 2) requires the disclosure of historical data on visa processing wait times so that travelers can have a better idea as to when they should begin planning their travels to the U.S; 3) Encourages better coordination between State Department and the Department of Commerce so that State Department can better prepare itself to meet the demand for increases in travel visas to the United States; 4) Allows for the establishment of a visa video conference pilot program and ; 5) Gives the Secretary of State the option to modify visa validity periods.

While I understand that some Members of this Committee will have concerns with my legislation, specifically from the Homeland and National Security aspects, please let me assure you that as someone who has served in both the Army Reserve and in the homeland security sector for over 25 years, that national security is of an upmost priority for me. Nothing in the legislation I have introduced is intended to compromise it in anyway. Rather, I intend this bi-partisan legislation to be starting point for discussion amongst our colleagues and

the affected agencies to look at options for the U.S.' to regain its share of the travel and tourism market, as well as create hundreds of thousands of jobs we so badly need.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration. I look forward to your questions and discussion.