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Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security

Hearing

“America on the Global Stage: Examining Efforts to Secure and Improve the U.S. Travel System and Prepare for Significant International Events”

WITNESSES

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House Testimony of Geoff Freeman, President and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association April 8, 2025

Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson and Members of the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the U.S. Travel Association. I am Geoff Freeman, President and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, the leading organization advocating for the travel industry in the United States. Our association represents every segment of the travel industry — airlines, airports, hotels, theme parks, rental car companies, cruise lines, and destinations — working together to grow travel to and within the United States.

1. Introduction to U.S. Travel and the Travel Industry

Travel is an economic powerhouse in the U.S., driving nearly \$2.9 trillion in economic activity each year. The travel industry supports more than 15 million jobs across the country — representing more than 10% of the U.S. workforce. These jobs span a diverse range of sectors, from aviation to hospitality to destination services. Beyond the numbers, travel drives critical tax revenue at the federal, state, and local levels and strengthens America’s standing in the world by fostering international diplomacy and business.

In 2024, international visitors injected \$181 billion into our economy. Beyond its economic contributions, the travel industry helps strengthen America’s standing globally, attracts talent and investment, and encourages cultural exchange. The U.S. is a world leader in travel, but we now face growing challenges that threaten both the future of the industry and America’s competitive edge.

2. The American Travel System is Under Pressure

The reality is: Bold leadership is required now to prioritize travel. Our travel systems are under pressure, and without immediate action, we risk falling behind. Last year, TSA broke records screening more than three million passengers not once, but twice. By next year, TSA will hit that number 50 times annually — equivalent to 50 Thanksgiving days in a single year. By 2028, we’re looking at 100 days per year with three million screenings. These numbers reflect the exponential growth in demand for air travel, as more people travel domestically and internationally.

However, our travel infrastructure is not equipped to handle these increasing numbers. We face:

- **Bureaucratic inefficiencies:** Long wait times at TSA checkpoints, customs, and visa processing hurt both the travel experience and our economy.
- **Outdated technology:** Much of our air traffic control (ATC) infrastructure still uses antiquated systems that need modernizing. Airport security and customs technology also need significant investment to streamline passenger flow and maintain high security standards.
- **Global competition:** Countries like China, India, and Saudi Arabia are rapidly advancing their travel infrastructure, putting the U.S. at risk of losing market share. These nations are making massive investments in their travel sectors, leaving the U.S. vulnerable if we don't act decisively.

Without modernization, we risk not only missing out on economic opportunities but also failing to meet the growing demands of global travelers. The competition is moving fast, and we must accelerate our own efforts to keep pace.

3. Golden Opportunity with a Mega Decade of Events

The next decade presents an extraordinary opportunity for the U.S. to further solidify its leadership in global travel. Major events over the next four years such as the 2025 Club World Cup, Ryder Cup, the 2026 World Cup, America's 250th anniversary, and 2028 Olympics are expected to contribute nearly \$100 billion in economic activity and bring an estimated 40 million international travelers.

However, with this tremendous opportunity comes a set of challenges. The surge in travel will place immense pressure on our infrastructure, and we must ensure we are ready to handle the increased demand. This means addressing key issues in safety, security, and efficient travel facilitation. If we fail to modernize and adapt, we risk not fully capturing the economic benefits and the potential for growth these events will bring, while giving our competitors the chance to question our leadership on the global stage.

We are grateful for President Trump's immediate action to establish the White House Task Force on the FIFA World Cup 2026, which will provide senior leadership and coordination across government to ensure the U.S. is fully prepared to accommodate the millions of travelers expected for the 2025 Club World Cup and the 2026 World Cup. By bringing together the necessary resources and expertise, the task force will provide the foundation for a transformative mega decade of events that will benefit not only the travel industry but the nation as a whole.

Through this effort, we have an opportunity to drive innovation, modernize infrastructure, and ensure America remains a premier destination for travel and business. With careful

planning and strategic investments, we can leverage this moment to further strengthen our economy, enhance security, and showcase America's role as a global leader in the travel and hospitality sectors.

4. Vision for American Travel Dominance

To meet these challenges head-on, U.S. Travel has worked alongside a slate of distinguished commission of leaders to create a comprehensive blueprint for the future of American travel. This is the Congress that can truly usher in robust innovation, make wholesale upgrades, and create a new system that sets America apart from the rest of the world.

Our proposed solutions focus on transforming the entire travel experience, from pre-travel planning to arrival, to ensure a seamless and secure process for travelers. The U.S. is currently the only G20 nation without a dedicated leader or agency overseeing travel policy. We encourage Congress and the administration to ensure a similar sustainable model that prioritizes travel policy and drives meaningful progress for decades to come.

Our full report and recommendations can be viewed at showcaseamericantravel.org and I have included an executive summary of the report as an addendum to my testimony. Here are the key components of our vision:

- **Government Leadership:** Bold leadership from the highest levels of government is essential. We commend President Trump's creation of Task Force 250 and the 2026 World Cup Task Force, and we urge continued focus on ensuring our travel infrastructure is ready for the future.
- **Visa Processing Reform:** Long delays in visa processing remain a major barrier to attracting international visitors – with some U.S. embassies and consulates seeing more than 400-day wait times for visa applicants to secure an interview. We recommend reforms to streamline and reduce bureaucratic delays, ensuring that the U.S. remains an attractive destination for global travelers while continuing to strengthen national security.
- **Revolutionizing TSA Screening:** It's time to rethink aviation security. The last breakthrough in airport screening was TSA PreCheck, which is more than a decade old. It's time for the next big leap in innovation. By equipping every TSA lane with state-of-the-art biometrics, advanced imaging technology (AIT), and Computed Tomography (CT) baggage scanners within five years, we can significantly improve security while reducing wait times. A largely manual operation that creates an

inefficient and unpleasant process for both officers and travelers can become a modern, automated experience where officers focus on risk and travelers can carry larger liquids and leave their shoes, jackets, and belts on.

- **Creating a World-Class Customs Process:** We must modernize U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operations to make the arrival process as seamless as possible. This means implementing advanced traveler vetting and biometric capabilities to dramatically reduce processing times at airports—allowing U.S. travelers to clear customs faster than ever, and Trusted Travelers passing through without even stopping—thanks to full automation. With the right tools and increased CBP staffing at international airports, we can maintain the highest levels of security while facilitating the smooth entry of millions of lawful visitors for these global events.
- **Modern and Fully Staffed Air Traffic Control System:** The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is approximately 3,000 controllers short of its staffing needs and 77% of the most critical facilities across the system are understaffed. The ATC system relies on decades-old radar, paper strips and systems run on floppy disks. We applaud President Trump and Secretary Duffy for their commitment to expanding pathways for controller certification. We call on Congress to do its part by providing full funding for ATC staffing, providing emergency appropriations to rapidly upgrade key parts of the ATC system, and by designating ATC investments as mandatory spending.

5. Conclusion

The next decade represents a defining moment for the American travel experience. The status quo is not an option. Travel demand is surging, our infrastructure is aging, and global competitors are moving fast. If we fail to act, we risk turning travelers away, ceding economic opportunities and compromising our leadership in the world. The steps we take today will determine whether the U.S. remains the global leader in travel or struggles to keep pace with competitors.

Travel is not just an economic driver — it is essential to America’s global competitiveness and leadership. U.S. Travel stands ready to partner with Congress and the administration to ensure we modernize our infrastructure and unlock the full economic potential of our travel system. But we cannot afford to wait. This is the future of travel. It’s bold, it’s achievable—and it’s time to make it happen.

I look forward to working with you to make this vision a reality. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Executive Summary

America is no longer the top destination for global travel. International visitation to the U.S. peaked in 2018 under President Trump but has failed to reach those levels since. The U.S. now ranks behind Spain and France in the global competition for visitors. China is on a path to catch or surpass us over the next decade. Our competitors are investing billions to leapfrog the U.S. and win a bigger share of the \$11.1 trillion in economic benefits from the global travel market.

It's time for a new strategy — a strategy to secure America's global travel leadership and establish the U.S. as the world's top destination. Just regaining our lost market share, which declined from 12.8% to 9.1% since 2015, would generate 127 million additional visitors over the next decade, resulting in \$478 billion in additional spending with U.S. businesses, 140,000 new American jobs and generate \$55 billion in tax revenue.

But we should aim higher. And the opportunity is right on our doorstep.

Over the next four years, America is set to host several premier events — including the 2025 Ryder Cup, America's 250th birthday, the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

With Presidential leadership and the right policies in place, these events can welcome 40 million international visitors and drive \$95 billion in economic activity.



We need a new strategy to secure America's global travel leadership.

To help seize this opportunity and regain American travel dominance, the [U.S. Travel Association](#) established the [Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel](#). Comprised of key leaders across the private and public sectors, the commission spent nearly a year gathering evidence, studying the latest security technologies and learning how progress is being made both at home and abroad.

The commission's report offers a guide for the Trump Administration and Congress to fulfill President Trump's pledge to usher in a Golden Age of Travel. Based on the commission's work, U.S. Travel recommends that Congress and the Trump Administration take four crucial steps to make America the top travel destination:



1

Establish White House leadership to showcase America at premier events. In the first 100 days, the Trump Administration should establish an interagency task force, chaired by a senior White House official, to bring sustained leadership and focus across the federal government to take advantage of global events coming our way over the next four years. The administration should leverage Brand USA, a public-private partnership, to market America's destinations to the world and increase international visitation for these events.

2

Deliver on President Trump's promise to efficiently and securely process visas for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

- **Provide full-strength consular staffing for visa processing.** Fully staff visa processing windows during all available business hours and surge staff to remotely process visa applications.
- **Extend visa validity for vetted, lawful visitors.** Extend B-1/B-2 visa validity for two years for lawful visa holders who have never been refused a visa, have previously visited the U.S., left the country on time and have no immigration or criminal violations.

- **Establish a National Vetting Service that builds on President Trump’s National Vetting Center.** Rather than relying on entry-level foreign service bureaucrats to conduct visa processing, seek legislation to establish a new National Vetting Service (NVS) dedicated to visa processing and traveler vetting. The NVS would be a professional national security workforce that is fully funded through visa fees, separate from the Foreign Service, and could be surged anywhere in the world to efficiently handle visa processing demand.
- **Create a “Secure Travel Partnership” program to increase countries that have strong travel security agreements with the U.S.** Establish a Secure Travel Partnership program where countries could qualify for visa facilitation benefits by meeting all security requirements of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and keeping refusal rates below 12% and overstay rates below 5%. In return, highly qualified first-time B-1/B-2 visa applicants from Partnership countries could have in-person interviews and biometric collection done by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) upon arrival at U.S. airports, rather than by appointment at U.S. consulates and embassies.

3

Create the world’s most advanced and secure airport screening process. Deploy state-of-the-art screening technology that strengthens security AND reduces wait times by allowing all travelers to carry water bottles and larger liquids, leave all electronics in their bags and keep their shoes, jackets and belts on.

- **Make a historic investment in security technology.** Immediately end the diversion of the Passenger Security Fee and increase technology funding to generate \$10 billion to modernize the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and put new identity verification, on-person screening and baggage scanning technology in every U.S. airport lane within five years.



4

Create strong, modern and efficient airport borders to keep America safe and global travel moving.

- **Provide full-strength staffing at airport customs.** Fund an additional 2,000 CBP officers to fully staff U.S. airports of entry. Surge CBP staffing to the National Targeting Center, National Vetting Center and Global Entry processing to maximize security while facilitating record travel.
- **End hours-long customs wait times for Americans returning home from abroad.** Expand CBP's Enhanced Passenger Processing (EPP) and Seamless Border Entry (SBE) to the top 25 airports by the end of 2026. EPP allows low-risk U.S. citizens to forgo customs interviews if they pass pre-arrival vetting, have their identities biometrically confirmed and have nothing to declare. SBE uses advanced biometric technology to confirm the identities of Global Entry travelers on the move, without the need to stop at a kiosk.
- **Strengthen protection against immigration overstays.** Invest \$600 million to complete CBP's biometric air exit system within two years and enhance the Traveler Verification Service (TVS) that is used to identify travelers entering and exiting the U.S.



Implementing these recommendations will strengthen our economy, create jobs across the country and improve our trade balance while ensuring America remains a secure and welcoming destination for international travelers.

To learn how modernizing our travel systems will deliver a world-class experience for both domestic and international travelers, visit [ShowcaseAmericanTravel.org](https://www.showcaseamericantourism.org).

April 8, 2025

Testimony of Jon Gruen to the House Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security for a hearing entitled, "America on the Global Stage: Examining Efforts to Secure and Improve the U.S. Travel System and Prepare for Significant International Events."

Good morning, Chairman Gimenez, Ranking Member McIver, and honorable members of the Transportation and Maritime Security Subcommittee. My name is Jon Gruen, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Fortem Technologies. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today on the timely issue of security in upcoming international events in the United States.

Fortem was founded in 2016 with the explicit intention of developing and producing the technology necessary to defeat a key threat that we saw on the horizon: drones. Nine years later, we have grown to be a global leader in drone detection and kinetic mitigation capabilities, specializing in low-collateral effect systems that can operate safely in populated areas and in the National Airspace. This unique specialty has garnered attention from government agencies and private stakeholders alike, and we are currently deployed at military bases both in the homeland and abroad, with CBP at the southern border, and with dozens of partners across the globe in critical infrastructure and public-event security.

Over the next decade, the United States will host the 2026 Men's World Cup, the 2028 Summer Olympics, the 2031 Women's World Cup, the 2031 Rugby World Cup, and the 2034 Winter Olympics. These are in addition to our regularly held domestic sporting events that frequently surpass 100,000 patrons in attendance.

As we approach these large events in the United States, all of which will have a significant international presence, it is incredibly important to do what this committee is discussing today: analyze what the state of security threats will be to the public and participants at the time of those events, and what should be done now to lower the risk of a security incident.

I started gaining experience in securing large international events as the U.S Special Operations Command lead to the inter-agency Task Force for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. At the time, the largest deployment of U.S. inter-agency personnel ever. My recent experiences are based on my company's work providing airspace awareness and counter drone solutions to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, the 2022 World Cup Games in Qatar, and the recent inauguration of President Trump right here on Capitol Hill.

There are numerous potential threats to large public events, but law enforcement and security personnel have developed capabilities to mitigate most of them. However, there is one threat which evolves every day, and has proliferated at such a fast pace, that law enforcement does not have the tools to mitigate it. Drones are the new weapon of choice for bad actors around the world, posing an escalating threat to security. Public

venues and critical infrastructure, such as airports and energy sites, are equally vulnerable to what might be the greatest asymmetric advantage ever achieved by people intent on death and damage.

As you are well aware, the occurrence of drone threats against critical infrastructure has surged by over 400% in the past five years, with the Department of Defense and Homeland Security reporting thousands of unauthorized drone incidents annually, posing escalating risks to national security. The effectiveness of these drones to cause catastrophic damage is also growing, as displayed in real-time on the battlefields of Ukraine where the development timeline for new drone technologies and tactics is 60 days.

Recent domestic incidents, such as a drone collision with a firefighting aircraft in Los Angeles and a rogue drone that shut down the Steelers-Ravens NFL Playoff game, will happen again at coming attractions if we don't act now. Even larger incidents, such as at Joint Base Langley-Eustis on December 6, 2023, resulted in a near month long inter-agency response to deploy counter drone assets, technology and personnel, all to no avail. Months later a similar incident over a key critical infrastructure site took place in the Pacific Northwest, where law enforcement personnel observed multiple drones flying at consistent intervals for more than a week. In both incidents, traditional drone detect-and-defeat solutions did not work. There was no advanced warning of incoming drones and no countermeasure to defeat what should be considered a clear and present danger.

These incidents have led to the broad acceptance that traditional drone countermeasures are no longer sufficient to protect against what was once thought to be a future threat – Dark Drones, or drones specifically designed to not emit RF signatures and thereby evade traditional drone detection solutions. In order to adequately protect any sensitive site or large public gathering today, dark drone detection and kinetic mitigation must be the core of any successful counter drone system.

Thankfully, we do have the technology to detect, track, and neutralize rogue drones before they cause harm. Companies like mine have developed AI-powered sensors necessary to identify the threats, including Dark Drones, as well as autonomous interceptor drones capable of taking down threats in real-time without collateral damage. Our system intercepts drones with aerial net capture, and then tows them to a pre-determined location, ensuring the safety of bystanders and allowing for forensics on the captured drone. As I mentioned before, this technology has protected spectators at the World Cup, Olympics, the Inauguration and other significant international events. We must field these defensive solutions at scale in the homeland now, as time is a critical aspect in fielding an effective counter-drone system.

Based on our experience, counter drone systems must start to be deployed twelve months before the event. During that time, there needs to be analysis of site-specific layered solutions; hardware must be purchased, delivered, and integrated; teams identified and trained on this new technology; concepts of operations developed; and

small hardware and software modifications made to maximize the effectiveness of those operations.

With the 2026 World Cup just over a year away, we must act quickly to enable relevant federal agencies to procure and deploy these assets as fast as possible and ensure that these agencies and their local law enforcement partners have the authority to act quickly in response to a threat. In a drone attack, seconds count: giving law enforcement personnel on the ground the ability to do their jobs is just common sense.

Currently, the responsibility of countering the threat of drones is spread across multiple agencies with limited authority to counter drone threats in real time. In the instance a drone is detected and determined to be a threat, authorized federal personnel must be present and still request explicit clearance in order to take mitigative action. These barriers prevent even well-prepared organizations, such as owners of stadiums or energy sites, from taking proactive action, and point to a larger systemic challenge that extends beyond large events like the World Cup. The chaos that ensued when unauthorized drone activity disrupted flights at Newark International Airport is a glaring example of our inability to detect and respond in real time.

Long-term resolution to the authorities' challenge has been a topic of debate in Congress for some time, and I am grateful for the thoughtful bipartisan legislation from this Committee's work on H.R. 8610 last year. However, these upcoming events require centralized and streamlined counter-drone processes as soon as possible to ensure their security. In addition, there needs to be delegation of authorities to more state and local law enforcement, even if it is temporary authorization for these events. Their involvement will enable greater flexibility, faster responses, and better security at a 12+ city event like the World Cup where there may not be enough federal personnel or assets to deploy. Empowering state and local law enforcement to defend high-risk locations from unauthorized drones will be critical to success.

We have been lucky that many recent drone incidents were not catastrophic, but luck is not a security strategy. The threat is real, but the solution is within reach. I urge Congress to provide federal agencies with the resources necessary to procure capable counter drone systems as soon as possible, and to make sure that Federal, State, and Local Law Enforcement are granted the appropriate authorities needed to protect these high visibility events. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify today, and look forward to engaging with all of you on this topic.