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# TRAVEL WEEKLY

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## GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

On Capitol Hill: House lawmakers introduce inbound tourism bill (09/26/2007)

By Michael Milligan

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Sam Farr (D-Calif.) and Rep. Jon Porter (R-Nev.), cochairs of the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus, introduced a bill in the House today that would provide \$50 million in matching grants to tourism entities specifically to bolster inbound travel to the U.S.

Under the bill, called The Improving Public Diplomacy through International Travel Act (H.R. 3670), \$50 million of the State Dept.'s budget would be earmarked for the program.

During a press conference on Capitol Hill, Farr said the funding was needed to counter negative perceptions of the U.S. that have emerged throughout the world in the years following the 9/11 terrorism attacks.

Since then, the government has implemented both tougher border security measures and criteria for obtaining visas for entry into the U.S.

But along with bolstering security, Farr said, the new security measures have inadvertently created what he referred to as a "Fortress America" image along with an impression that visitors are not welcomed.

"Our image is broken," Farr said.

Farr was joined at the press conference by Porter; Roger Dow, president and CEO of the Travel Industry Association; Bill Hardman, president and CEO of the Southeast Tourism Society; Charles Merin, president of the Travel Business Roundtable; Rossi Ralenkotter, president and CEO of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority; Jim Santini, legislative counsel for the National Tour Association; and Caroline Beteta, executive director of the California Travel and Tourism Commission, who voiced support matching grant program.

The bill calls upon the Secretary of State "to enhance diplomatic relations with foreign countries and to advance domestic business interests abroad by establishing a competitive grant program which encourages international travel to the United States."

The grants would be targeted to increase tourism from five key inbound markets: Canada, Mexico, the U.K., Japan and Germany.

To receive a grant, entities would be required to provide matching funds from a non-federal source, equal to the initial grant amount. The funds may include in-kind donations of goods and services valued at their fair market rate.

"There is no doubt that the [U.S. is] suffering," said Rep. William Delahunt (DMass.), who also spoke.

Potential inbound visitors are choosing destinations other than the U.S., he said, noting that since 9/11, the U.S. has lost \$90 billion in revenue due to declining inbound travel.

In the long run, Delahunt said, if left unchecked, growing negative perceptions of the U.S. could pose a national security concern for the country.

"This is about helping America and helping America's people," Dow said. Dow noted that a recent study by the Discover America Partnership, an inbound tourism advocacy group, found most travelers to the U.S. were more fearful of the U.S. customs and border officials than the possibility of terrorism or crime.

The \$50 million program created by the bill would foster "person-to-person diplomacy," he said, as more visitors from around the world see and experience the U.S.

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