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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Where the Jobs Are: Promoting Tourism to America”
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
May 16, 2012

I thank my colleagues for holding this hearing.

International tourism is a proven engine of economic growth in our country and a significant contributor to our national economic recovery.

This shouldn't be a partisan issue, but we've almost had no hearings in the last year and a half where the Republicans have not turned it in to a partisan issue.

According to the Department of Commerce, tourism spending surged 8% last year to over \$1 trillion and supported 7.6 million jobs. This is one of our nation's top exports. And it's one of the few export industries guaranteed to create jobs that won't move off-shore.

Foreign visitors are putting Americans back to work and giving the world a window into our natural and cultural treasures.

Luckily, we have two people here from California who are going to advance our cause, because we are the gateway for tourism and hospitality to the Pacific area. The L.A. Chamber of Commerce estimates that every 1% increase in international visitors to Los Angeles infuses local businesses with a \$43 million increase in direct spending and an estimated \$88 million increase in economic impact.

So the question is – how can we get more people to come?

The President has laid out a robust goal to attract 100 million international visitors annually within ten years, a goal that I think both parties ought to support. The National Travel and Tourism Strategy unveiled last week is a blueprint to make it achievable with concerted coordination between government and industry.

Some of the opportunities to attract more foreign visitors can be found in the Visa Waiver Program, which enables visitors from eligible countries to tour the United States for up to 90 days without a visa. After South Korea became eligible for the program in 2008, the number of Korean visitors to the United States increased 30%, and estimates indicate that number could increase by another 55% by 2016.

Other solutions will require targeted improvements to speed the resolution of visa backlogs in countries not eligible for the Visa Waiver Program.

I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about why tourists come to my district. In Beverly Hills, we have Rodeo Drive. In Hollywood, we have Grauman's Chinese Theater on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. We have the beaches of Santa Monica and all the way down the coast.

We have lesser known, but wonderful tourism opportunities. One example is the Conejo Valley, where internationally renowned Tour-de-France teams have been training along the world class hiking and biking trails of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. We have a lot of wonderful things to see, and there are times during the year when Palm Springs gets a little warm, so while they spend maybe a little less time in Palm Springs, they can come to the rest of California. But go to Palm Springs, as well, because we just have so much for people to see in the State of California.

I think we ought to approach this in a bipartisan way to encourage tourism and support the efforts of the President, who is trying to do the same thing. I welcome our distinguished witness. She certainly has a place with a lot to offer for tourists. I wish I could find time to get back to Hawaii, but I spend all my time in California, so I'm not deprived of wonderful tourist attractions.