

**Transcript:**  
**United States Travel and Tourism Advisory Board Meeting**  
**August 22, 2019**  
**2:00 pm EDT (via Teleconference)**

Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. Currently all lines are in listen-only mode and will be opened periodically throughout the call. I'd also like to inform all parties that today's conference is being recorded. If you disagree, you may disconnect at this time.

I would now like to turn the call over to Mr. Brian Beall. Thank you and you may begin.

Brian Beall: Good afternoon, good morning everybody and welcome to today's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board (TTAB) meeting by telephone. I'm the Designated Federal Office for the Board and will kick us off. Before I turn it over to our TTAB Chair, John Sprouls, I will be running through roll call.

If the operator could please open the lines. I'll go down the TTAB roster and if you're on the line, if you could identify, that would be great.

Coordinator: The lines are all open.

Brian Beall: Great. Okay. John Sprouls.

John Sprouls: Yes. I'm here.

Brian Beall: Kurt Ekert.

Kurt Ekert Here.

Brian Beall: And Todd Davidson.

Todd Davidson: I am here.

Brian Beall: Brad Dean.

Brad Dean: I'm here.

Brian Beall: Derek DeCross.

Derek DeCross: Here.

Brian Beall: Fred Dixon. Sean Donohue.

Sean Donohue: Hi Brian.

Brian Beall: Hi. Jim Hagen. Russ Hedge.

Russ Hedge: Here.

Brian Beall: Pam Inman.

Pam Inman: Hello everyone.

Brian Beall: Debbie Johnson.

Debbie Johnson: Here.

Brian Beall: Tom Klein.

Tom Klein: Here. Thank you.

Brian Beall: Scott Lynn. Steve Morrissey.

Max Slutsky: Max Slutsky's on for Steve Morrissey.

Brian Beall: Okay. Mary Motsenbocker. Susan Presby.

Susan Presby: Here.

Brian Beall: Tricia Primrose.

Tricia Primrose: Here.

Brian Beall: Olga Ramudo.

Olga Ramudo: Here.

Brian Beall: Stephen Revetria.

Stephen Revetria: Here.

Brian Beall: Brian Rothery.

Brian Rothery: Here.

Brian Beall: Adam Sacks. Bryan Saltzburg.

Bryan Saltzburg: Here.

Brian Beall: Caryn Seidman-Becker. Bill Talbert.

Bill Talbert: Bill Talbert is here.

Brian Beall: Denise Thevenot. Rob Torres.

Rob Torres: Here.

Brian Beall: And Ernie Wooden.

Ernie Wooden: Here.

Brian Beall: Excellent. Operator if you could please go ahead and close the lines, I will now turn it over to our TTAB Chair John Sprouls.

Coordinator: They are closed.

John Sprouls: Thank you Brian. I will be brief. I just want to thank everybody for being able to join us and extend my thanks to the subcommittee and everyone aboard. Once again, our board has been asked to turn something around on a dime and has been able to do that in fabulous fashion.

I don't know if there is a quicker board anywhere in the Federal Government than this one, but I would put our record up against anyone else. At this point, I would like to turn it over to our subcommittee chair Kurt, to take us through the presentation of the UNWTO recommendation letter. Kurt.

Kurt Ekert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope everybody has a copy of the letter that we have drafted which we'll be referencing in the discussion today. So, let me just jump into it very quickly. There's been a lot of hard work done by all the

folks that have been a part of this working group and committee and my hats off to everybody for the great efforts to date.

So what we did is we examined the issue of whether and how rejoining the United Nations World Tourism Organization could advance the interests of the U.S. travel and tourism industry, and we concluded that it would be beneficial for the United States to rejoin the organization subject to a set of conditions which we've outlined in the letter, which again I think all of you have, with representation in organization leadership positions being fundamentally key.

We also evaluated concerns regarding reentry and found compelling reasons to overcome them which we'll talk about. We also recommend additional steps related to re-entry that could help fully maximize the value to our industry.

Now, in addition to the broad benefits that U.S. membership would bring to the industry, we believe that the UNWTO has four specific initiatives which also help lead us to our recommendation. Those are global policy development; investment and development in emerging markets; innovation; and child protection, and we explore these below. We will be speaking about these a bit on the call today and about the benefits that they would yield to the U.S. travel and tourism industry.

So, jumping right into it, in terms of the conditions that we outlined, there are four fundamental ones. The first is the general assembly's concurrent approval of the United States as reinstatement as a member of the UNWTO. Number two is the U.S. government making every effort possible to ensure the successful election of the U.S. to the UNWTO Executive Council.

Third is our State Department successfully securing a minimum of three staff leadership roles in the organization, including that of Deputy Secretary General and one or more executive director roles. And fourth, the General Assembly's formal approval at its upcoming September meeting of the reduction of the maximum dues share of member states that exceed 20% of world GNP from 5% to 4%. In terms of the recommendations, we also recommend that the U.S. Government take additional steps in order to maximize the benefits of membership.

First, the State Department should work to appoint individuals with private sector experience in travel and tourism. We recommend that the TTAB be officially designated to represent the U.S. travel and tourism industry perspective to UNWTO appointees on an ongoing basis. We recommend that the U.S. receive immediate representation on the following influential UNWTO special committees: program and budget committee, the committee on tourism and competitiveness, as well as the committee on tourism and sustainability. And last, we recommend that the UNWTO establish a formal relationship with the WTTC, or the World Travel and Tourism Council, to include creating a single point of contact and working toward a jointly defined point of action.

Now, rightly there were legitimate political concerns raised about the risks of rejoining or regaining membership. The two primary concerns are around U.S. foreign policy and budget implications. With respect to foreign policy, there are a number of nations that are a part of the UNWTO, and we have a complicated relationship with many of these countries.

But our recommendation is that given the complicated nature of our relationships, we believe this presents a very compelling reason why the U.S. should reengage with the UNWTO so that we actually have a voice in

policymaking and a voice in representing our national interests around the world.

On the budget, budget concerns are always valid, but there are countervailing or countermanding factors here. First, the dues payment is relatively small with respect to other foreign policy related budget items, especially given the intended qualitative and quantitative benefits at hand.

Second is without member status, we cannot substantively influence the policy agenda, and U.S. membership will enable wider U.S. travel and tourism interests to be representative of the UNWTO through government channels, as well as through individual company and organization participation in the UNWTO affiliate program.

Now we've had great work done to date, as I mentioned, by the working group chairs. We're going to go through each of the efforts by the working groups. First is on global policy development, which has been led tremendously by Russ Hedge. So, Russ, the floor is yours.

Russ Hedge: Thanks, Kurt. So, my working group included Mary Motsenbocker and Denise Thevenot, and I also wanted to give a shout out to our staff liaison, Jennifer, who was very responsive to our information requests.

Now as Kurt said, our working group focus was to identify policy areas where rejoining UNWTO might either benefit U.S. Government policy efforts as they relate to travel and tourism and the travel and tourism industry or secondly, enable U.S. businesses to make and more fully access UNWTO's programs.

We looked at six different policy areas and found that each had significant potential benefits to rejoining. I want to acknowledge that we benefitted from the perspectives offered by Don Welsh at Destinations International, Tori Barnes at U.S. Travel, and also data was supplied to us by the UNWTO affiliate program, which Kurt mentioned earlier. It's a program that serves about 500 businesses around the world, including 30 U.S. businesses with programs and resources.

So just running through the six different policy areas, in terms of visa facilitation, our focus was on biometric development. This is an issue that was addressed by TTAB in the past. We felt that the USA can benefit from common technologies and standards across countries and that the UNWTO could provide that sort of global platform.

In terms of destination management, the UNWTO offers resources and a certification program, but perhaps the biggest benefit to our destination industry would be the potential role of UNWTO as a venue for addressing common challenges like the challenge of overtourism.

The third topic that emerged was workforce development. This was another topic that was previously tackled by TTAB. One of the conclusions of that TTAB subcommittee was that the U.S. travel industry could benefit from developing and then applying common evaluation metrics to our workforce development programs, which then would allow us collectively to identify which programs deserve the most investment. The feeling was that the UNWTO would be a great global platform for taking that U.S. effort and applying it globally.

Sustainable tourism was another area we looked into. Our analysis focused on UNWTO efforts to advance resource efficiency and waste production in



tourism. It's an area that's moving quickly and we felt that U.S. companies could benefit from accelerated progress offered through UNWTO.

The final area that appears under the global policy development section is related to statistics and macroeconomic analysis. Our working group analysis focused on UNWTO's role in developing travel and tourism statistics and aligning the accounts which are important to our industry, and the United States and our government understanding how inflows and outflows of travel and tourism affect our economy. The feeling was that to the extent that we can be fully at the table as they're developing new data collection and techniques and methodology, that would be a good thing.

And then finally, as Kurt mentioned, there's a fourth section on anti-sex trafficking. This is an important area for all of us in U.S. travel and tourism and it emerged as a fourth section of this report given that importance.

UNWTO has a platform that's called the World Travel Network on Child Protection which we felt could be helpful to drive forward additional progress in other countries. And that wraps up my summary, Kurt.

Kurt Ekert: Russ, thank you so very much. The next group was the innovation working group led by Rob Torres. Rob.

Rob Torres: Thanks Kurt. And thanks to the working group that came together to discuss innovation. The UNWTO recently developed a strategy focused on innovation and this is our strategy for the industry.

And the main goal for the individual strategic pillar is to drive the digital innovation...

Kurt Ekert: Rob, it's a little bit difficult to hear you. I don't know if you're on Bluetooth or...

Rob Torres: Okay. Just a second.

Kurt Ekert: Thank you.

Rob Torres: Is this better? Can people hear better? Kurt, is that any better. Hello?

Kurt Ekert: Much. Yes, that's better. That's good Rob.

Rob Torres: Is that better? Okay. Sorry about that. Hopefully I'll speak up a little better. I'm in transit here and I apologize. So basically, you know the UNWTO's mission for the strategic pillar in innovation is really to drive the digitalization of tourism. It should create an innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem that will drive economic growth and increase job creation and sustainability within our sector.

They made some progress on this and we analyzed as a group some of the objectives that the UNWTO has established. There are six areas of projects that they are working on now and those include an innovation hub network along with tourism tech adventures. They're working on a digital network platform as well as an innovation leaders' program. They're developing a way to deliver research on innovation traveler trends and guidelines.

And then they also have a work stream focused on smart destinations and capacity building. As we analyze some of these projects and what's happening, we realize that all of these projects were really formed to encourage transparency and cooperation amongst the various players, both public and private sector, to drive innovation in the tourism industry.

So, as we looked at it and talked a bit back and forth whether or not the U.S. would want to rejoin the UNWTO, we identified a couple – well, there were several benefits that we identified, but some in particular that would result in membership could be first being that by joining UNWTO, member companies could serve as an information platform for issues such as sustainable tourism, other tourism and other best practices for matters including airport infrastructure and modernization, which has been on the TTAB list, as you well know.

Second, we believe that membership could accelerate the United States initiative on workforce development as it pertains to our industry and could also hope to improve where we are going with biometric work that's being done by leveraging what UNWTO's smart destination project is doing.

And so those are really some of the main benefits, but also we believe that full engagement in the UNWTO as recommended earlier by Kurt could provide expanded access to all of these innovation initiatives for some small- or medium-sized businesses here in the U.S.

And lastly, it could drive more VC-type investment in travel and tourism through this membership. It was good to note, and our group did speak a little bit, about how currently there are a variety of mainly larger type businesses in our industry that are already involved in UNWTO without the U.S.'s membership.

And so we really focused a lot around whether they gained benefits through membership and I think we could see a lot of more support and recognition for small and medium-sized businesses. And that was about the majority of our conversation.

Kurt Ekert: That's great Rob. Thank you. And we heard you crystal clear.

Rob Torres: Oh good.

Kurt Ekert: The third subgroup or working group was around investment and development in emerging markets and that's been led by Ernie Wooden. And Ernie we would like to hear commentary from you as well.

Ernie Wooden: Thank you very much Kurt. First, I want to thank the Secretary, chair and subcommittee and vice chair for inviting us to examine this critical issue of rejoining the UNWTO. Special thanks to my co-chairperson Pam Inman on the subcommittee and the research staff of LA Tourism led by Adam Burke.

We were tasked with recommending how the United States Government could leverage its potential membership in the UNWTO to advance U.S. travel and tourism interests related to investment and development in emerging markets.

Briefly, several themes came together for us and our recommendation. One was that it's clear and it's generally accepted wisdom that tourism frequently provides the first point of entry in cultivating business relationships and emerging markets.

And for this reason, we believe there's an economically compelling argument for re-entry as the focus of the UNWTO in this area undoubtedly will provide the United States with opportunities to create new markets for U.S. exports of goods and services.

The second theme that we identified is that the UNWTO is actively engaged in an effort to alleviate poverty through tourism and by doing so it's clear that

that there's an effort to win the hearts and minds of the people they're working with in these areas.

And they're using a variety of platforms and initiatives, including China's Silk Road initiative, and we could see that, for example, in India where investment through the Silk Road initiative is having a positive impact on poverty in that area. But the Silk Road initiative has now become a part of the official mission statement of the UNWTO due to the influence of seasoned senior positions held by Chinese officials in the UNWTO.

The third theme we sought to examine and came to the conclusion that we believe that the United States reuniting with the UNWTO and not being involved at this point, it robs us of economic opportunities, as well as the so-called soft power influence in these emerging markets across a variety of industries, including the potential of inbound tourism visitation to the United States as air connectivity becomes more available in those areas.

And for these reasons, our subcommittee agrees that the recommendations as outlined in the TTAB letter that is under discussion today should be advanced to the secretary.

Kurt Ekert: Ernie, thank you and overall the output from the three working groups. Hopefully everybody gets a flavor for what has been outstanding and incredibly responsive given a very short time window to do this very important work. So, to Russ, to Rob, to Ernie – everyone who's given their time and, more importantly, their brains for this exercise, thank you.

Also, the NTTO team has been invaluable in lending their expertise and time to help our subcommittee rapidly get to a well-informed and researched recommendation.

Now just to reiterate one point, as Russ mentioned in his remarks, given the U.S. travel and tourism sector's leadership on anti-sex trafficking efforts, we believe the U.S. joining the UNWTO could have a powerful impact on their efforts to fight, discourage and also stimulate additional progress in other member countries. That's a very important fourth point here.

Overall, given the potential benefits at hand, we recommend that the U.S. rejoins the UNWTO contingent on the conditions we have outlined, which overcome the primary objections to or concerns about membership. We believe through active reengagement with the UNWTO, the U.S. will be well positioned to leverage the economic, social and diplomatic power of travel and tourism as a key driver in emerging markets, as well as in developed countries for years to come.

Mr. Chairman, thank you and back to you.

John Sprouls: Kurt, thank you and thank you for your leadership on this subcommittee and I also thank Russ, Rob, and Ernie for all their work and the work of everyone else on the committee.

At this point, we will deliberate the recommendations putting forth this letter to the Secretary to rejoin the UNWTO. So, if I could ask the operator to open the phones to see if we have any comments or questions or recommendations with respect to the letter. Thank you.

Brian Beall: And this is Brian. Just one point to clarify, this is open for board members only at this time for comments on the letter.

John Sprouls: Thank you, Brian.

Coordinator: The lines are open.

Tom Klein: Good morning, it's Tom Klein. I think it's great what you all have put together here. I just had one quick question I need clarity on. When and why did the TTAB get out of the organization?

John Sprouls: Actually, if it's okay, I'll defer to the NTTO, given that that happened literally 20 something years ago.

Tom Klein: Oh, okay.

Brian Beall: Right, and this is Brian. In the beginning of the letter there's a brief synopsis of the situation. It was a different time in Washington and memberships in different organizations were being eliminated and the decision was made then for the U.S. not to partake in the UNWTO.

Tom Klein: Okay. Thanks for that.

(TTAB Member): What's happened is that there's been a bit of a vacuum since then and we've not been able to participate in a lot of policy making and in a lot of influential areas of the world.

Tom Klein: That makes sense. Fantastic. Well done guys. I think it was well put together.

Olga Ramudo: This is Olga Ramudo. Yes, I see that we have not been a member since 1975 which is amazing. This is a superb letter. Congratulations to the whole group, proud to be part of this board with you know, I mean the members such as these. This is amazing. I just have one question.

In the membership recommendations, I see that we are recommending that UNWTO establish a formal relationship with the WTTC. I think that the recommendations before are pertaining to us having control, I guess. If that doesn't happen, which is a very valid request, we would still proceed with our membership – with our recommendation for becoming a member. Correct?

John Sprouls: My sense is we have to see whether everything else was satisfied, that would be an adjustment call of the government to make. It's our recommendation that we push for that very hard.

Olga Ramudo: Thank you.

John Sprouls: Any other comments, questions? If not, Brian I would ask you whether we have anyone for public comment.

Brian Beall: John, we didn't have anybody from the public indicate their desire to make a comment on this call, but operator if you could please instruct anyone from the public who would like to make a comment, how to do so. We will invite members of the public to make comments now if they choose.

Coordinator: Yes. To make a comment please press Star 1, record your name and ensure your phone is unmuted during that time so you can record your name. Once again that is Star 1 and record your name. One moment while we see if any questions come in. One moment please.

Our first question comes from Valarie Segarra. You may go ahead.

Valarie Segarra: Hi everybody it's Valerie from Las Vegas. I just want to say very well done, great job. It's about time we look at rejoining programs such as visiting



groups to help our global initiatives for industry and move forward and for us to stay effective in the industry. Thanks so much for your hard work.

John Sprouls: Thank you. Operator anyone else?

Coordinator: There is no one else at this time.

John Sprouls: Okay, thank you. Then in that case I'm going to call for the vote. I would remind everyone that only board members can vote. We will do a voice vote and if it's not obvious from that, then we will do a roll call. But I don't think we'll need to.

Coordinator: One moment. I need to open everybody back up again.

John Sprouls: Oh, okay. Thank you.

Coordinator: All right. We did it.

John Sprouls: Okay. Thank you, operator. At this point, calling upon the board members, I would ask all who are in favor of approving the letter and sending it on to the Secretary to please signify by saying Aye.

(Group): Aye.

John Sprouls: Any opposed? The letter has been adopted. Thank you all very, very much. At this point, I would like to call on Deputy Assistant Secretary for Travel and Tourism, Phil Lovas, to give us a couple of comments about the next steps for the board.

Phil Lovas: Thank you John. I appreciate it and echo your comments at the beginning. I would certainly put the work product of this board up against any similar board across the entire Federal Government. On behalf of Secretary (Ross), I want to thank the TTAB and especially the members of the UNWTO subcommittee for your excellent work to develop the recommendation letter on such an accelerated timeframe. It was far more robust than anyone could have expected with just a few weeks to complete it and we are very appreciative.

So, we'll now move this letter on to Secretary (Ross). We'll also share the letter with our colleagues at the Department of State, which is the department that's responsible for international organization affairs. As we kind of end your first year of this two-year term, I also wanted to take a moment to recognize the tremendous work that the TTAB did this first year of your term.

We held five meetings in person or via phone. You've delivered four thoughtful letters with actionable recommendations. I know Secretary (Ross) values all of your hard work and appreciated the opportunity to share an update at the July meeting on how the Administration has taken action related to your previous recommendations.

Looking forward to the second year of the term, we'll be working with John and Kurt to identify the date for the next TTAB meeting. We anticipate that likely will be perhaps mid-September, early December, excuse me, mid-November, early December, we're still working that out.

But with that again, thank you for all of your hard work not only on this letter but certainly for the past year. I hope that you have a great rest of the summer and we will see you later in the fall. And with that I'll be turning it back to John.

John Sprouls: Thank you Phil. Thank you for those comments and I echo them of course. I think everyone on this board should be very, very proud of the work product that we've had and of our ability to respond when requested in order to help move travel and tourism issues forward not only with the Secretary but within the entire Federal Government.

Unless there is anything else to come before the board, I would invite Brian to handle the closure of the meeting.

Brian Beall: Great. Thank you, John. And again, thank you to all of the board members and members of the public that have joined us today. This officially concludes today's Travel and Tourism Advisory Board meeting. Operator, thank you also for your support.

John Sprouls: Thank you everybody.

Coordinator: That concludes today's conference. Thank you all for participating. You may now disconnect.

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