

WESTERN STATES TOURISM POLICY COUNCIL

Formation

The Western States Tourism Policy Council (WSTPC) is a consortium of thirteen western state tourism offices, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Inspired by the 1995 White House Conference on Travel and Tourism, which urged greater regional attention to the interrelationships between Federal lands, the environment and tourism, eight western states in 1996 formed the WSTPC. Since its establishment, the mission of the WSTPC has remained: *To advance understanding and increase support for public policies that enhance the positive impact of travel and tourism on the economies and environments of states and communities in the West.*

In September, 1997, a notable Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the then eight states of the WSTPC and nine Federal agencies, including the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Fish & Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the USDA Forest Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Federal Highway Administration. The signatories pledged to share information and provide mutual support and cooperation on common programs and projects. So successful was the MOU that it was renewed and expanded in November, 2001, between now eleven western states and two additional Federal agencies, the Department of Commerce Office of Travel and Tourism Industries and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. At least two or three times each year the WSTPC and its Federal partners hold joint meetings to discuss issues and concerns and to plan projects, especially regional intergovernmental conferences.

WSTPC-Federal Partners Conferences

Since it was formed seven years ago, the WSTPC, its Federal partners and other Federal agencies have held six highly successful regional meetings:

- **1996: Tourism and the Public Lands – Lake Tahoe, NV**
- **1997: Cultural Tourism in the West – Los Angeles, CA**
- **1998: Gateway Communities in the West – Tacoma, WA**
- **1999: Transportation and Tourism – Portland, OR**
- **2000: Facilitation of International Travel – Reno, NV**
- **2002: Gateway Communities Revisited – Bernalillo, NM**

Not only have these conferences attracted as many as 500 attendees from throughout the West, they have produced tangible results that have had a significant impact on western tourism. For example: the 1996 Conference on Tourism and the Public Lands was the first such conference to bring the public and private sectors together to address this topic and led directly to the 1997 MOU. The 1998 Gateways Conference resulted in the subsequent drafting and introduction in Congress of the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act and in the establishment of the National Alliance of Gateway Communities, the first national organization solely dedicated to the interests of gateway communities. The 1999 Transportation and Tourism Conference was the first ever devoted to this critical topic and led to increased industry support for the national scenic byways and transportation enhancements programs, and to the later formation of the National Travel, Tourism and Recreation Coalition for Surface Transportation. The Conference on Facilitation of International Travel in 2000 was another industry first and marked the WSTPC's involvement in issues pertaining to the treatment of international visitors to the U.S. The 2002 Gateways Conference celebrated Federal and state support for gateways and to a recommitment to enactment of the Gateway Communities Cooperation Act.

Market Development Cooperator Program

In 2002, the WSTPC was the proud recipient of a three-year Market Development Cooperator Grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce. In the ten years of the MDCP, the WSTPC is one of only three travel and tourism organizations to receive this award. As a result, the WSTPC is developing a \$1.2 million program dedicated to showing western gateway communities how to increase the number of international visitors.

Public Policy Issues

The WSTPC has always had as its primary mission supporting public policies that enable travel and tourism to have a more positive impact in the West. The WSTPC strategy has been to identify emerging issues and determine their likely impact on western tourism, to work with allies and friends in the industry and in Congress and government agencies and to communicate its views to policy-makers.

Following are some of the major issues in which the WSTPC has been involved:

Federal Lands

Gateway Communities Cooperation Act. The WSTPC primarily drafted this historic legislation, which will substantially strengthen the capacity of gateway communities to be meaningful partners with the Federal land agencies that are their neighbors. The WSTPC testified at the 2002 Congressional hearing on the issue. The legislation nearly passed in the 107th Congress, falling short only in the final days, and has been reintroduced in the 108th Congress with the support of the Federal land agencies and key Congressional leaders.

Fee Demo. The WSTPC has consistently supported strengthening and expanding the recreation fee demonstration program, and making it a permanent program. Among other recommendations, the WSTPC has specifically favored including other Federal agencies in the program; encouraging greater use of state-wide or regional fee passes to encompass multiple Federal and State lands and directing that revenue from special use permits be retained at the location where they are collected, as is the case with fee demo revenue.

Federal Lands Budgets. The WSTPC follows the Federal budget and appropriations processes and supports adequate funding for Federal land agencies' programs and activities beneficial to tourism and recreation.

Recreation One-Stop. In 2002, the WSTPC was instrumental in convincing the Department of the Interior to substantially revise its plans to develop a Federal "one-stop" national vacation planner on the Internet that could have enabled anyone to plan and make reservations and other arrangements for trips throughout the country in direct competition with state tourism offices and many private sector travel companies. As a result of the WSTPC's intervention, the Department decided to limit its proposal to a website for complete and timely information about recreation opportunities on all the Federal lands with links to state tourism office and other industry websites.

Role of State Tourism Offices in Public Lands Planning. The WSTPC has consistently advocated an increased role for state tourism offices in the planning and implementation of Federal land agency planning processes. As a direct result of WSTPC efforts, such a role for state tourism offices has been explicitly recognized in the proposed national recreation lakes system and the Forest Service's national recreation plan.

International Marketing of U.S. as Tourism Destination

American Travel Promotion Act (Foley-Farr Act). The WSTPC strongly supported this legislation in the 107th Congress, which would have allocated \$100 million to state tourism offices to be used for international tourism marketing programs. Although not passed by Congress, this legislation was the inspiration for the 2003 Congressional establishment of a \$50 million fund to support an international tourism marketing campaign.

\$50 Million International Tourism Marketing Campaign. The WSTPC strongly supported passage of this provision in the 2003 Omnibus Appropriations Act and has submitted extensive comments to the U.S. Department of Commerce with recommendations about its implementation.

New National Tourism Office. The WSTPC continues to support establishment of a permanent, adequately funded Federal agency to market the U.S. as the world's premier tourism destination.

Transportation

TEA 21. The WSTPC has strongly supported the tourism-friendly provisions of this 1997 Federal highway reauthorization legislation, especially the national scenic byways program and the transportation enhancements program. The WSTPC also successfully urged the Federal Highway Administration to adopt an expansive interpretation of a TEA-21 provision authorizing funding for highway tourist welcome centers, so that welcome centers do not have to be located only on national scenic byways to qualify for funding.

2003 Federal Highway Reauthorization. As Congress moves toward the next reauthorization of the Federal highway and other surface transportation programs, the WSTPC has played a lead role in ensuring that the interests of travel, tourism and recreation are fully considered. As a charter member, the WSTPC was instrumental in planning and forming the National Travel, Tourism and Recreation Coalition for Surface Transportation, the only national tourism coalition supporting reauthorization.

Facilitation of International Travel

Visa Waiver Program. The WSTPC successfully supported making the visa waiver program permanent, as passed by Congress in the year 2000.

Section 110 Repeal. The WSTPC was again an industry leader in successfully urging Congress in 2000 to repeal Section 110 of the 1996 Immigration Reform Act, which would have required identification and documentation of every in-bound *and* out-bound international traveler to the U.S. at both air and land points of entry. The concern was that this would have resulted in significant congestion at these entry points and discouraged many visitors to the U.S.

INS Proposed 30-Day Visa Rule. The WSTPC was among the first to recognize the potential adverse impact of this proposed regulation on the tourism industry and its efforts resulted in a 2002 Congressional hearing on the issue and eventual withdrawal of the proposed rule in early 2003.

EPA Study of Environmental Impact of Travel and Tourism.

The WSTPC was again among the first in early 2000 to recognize the potential negative impact of this draft study on travel and tourism. Following extensive comments by the WSTPC and other industry organizations and several meetings with EPA staff, the study was substantially revised before its uneventful publication in 2002.

Sierra Club v. Hawaii Tourism Authority

The WSTPC immediately recognized the potential precedent-setting impact of this litigation on travel and tourism in every state and on the ability of state tourism offices everywhere to perform their tourism marketing function. The WSTPC retained counsel

in Hawaii and worked closely with the Hawaii Tourism Authority and the Office of the Attorney General of Hawaii in developing the most effective legal strategy in response to this threat. After nearly three years of consideration, the Supreme Court of Hawaii in early 2003 dismissed the case.

Homeland Security

The WSTPC is cognizant of the fact that new homeland security regulations can have a significant impact on travel and tourism. The WSTPC closely monitors these developments and through its membership in Americans for Better Borders, which is operated by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and through other alliances, ensures that the interests of tourism in the West are fully considered.

Summary and Conclusions

In just seven years, the WSTPC has become the most respected and influential regional tourism organization in the country. It has influenced the outcome of nearly a dozen public policy issues with great potential impact on travel and tourism in the West and throughout the nation. It has organized innovative and productive educational conferences that have resulted in new industry programs and initiatives. As it moves forward with its MDCP implementation, it will make further substantial contributions to a strong and healthy tourism industry in the West.