

TESTIMONY OF
Ralph Cutié
Director and Chief Executive Officer
Miami International Airport

BEFORE

Senate Subcommittee on Tourism, Trade, and Export Promotion

ON

Reviving Conventions & Tourism Through International Travel

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Rosen, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today along with this distinguished panel of travel and tourism professionals on this very important issue.

My name is Ralph Cutié, and I am the Director and Chief Executive Officer for the Miami-Dade County Aviation System which includes Miami International Airport (MIA), Miami-Opa Locka General Aviation Airport (OPF), Miami Executive General Aviation Airport (TMB), Homestead General Aviation Airport (X51), and the Training and Transition Airport (TNT).

Background

MIA is operated by the Miami-Dade Aviation Department and is the property of Miami-Dade County government. MIA offers more flights to Latin America and the Caribbean than any other U.S. airport and is America's busiest airport for international passengers. MIA boasts a lineup of 96 air carriers including 61 international carriers. MIA is also the top U.S. airport for international freight. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, MIA handled over 47 million passengers. MIA is also the leading economic engine for Miami-Dade County and the state of Florida, generating business revenue of \$31.9 billion annually and approximately 60 percent of all international visitors to Florida. MIA's vision is to grow from a recognized hemispheric hub to a global airport of choice that offers customers a world-class experience and an expanded route network with direct passenger and cargo access to all world regions.

COVID-19 put an immediate halt to our vision. From a record setting 47 million passengers in 2019, MIA experienced empty terminals and empty aircrafts. If not for the financial assistance provided by Congress, MIA along with every other airport in this country would not have been in the position to restart our industry.

Chairwomen Rosen, Ranking Member Scott, thank you for calling this hearing today. International travel is critical to the economic recovery of Miami-Dade County, Florida, and our great Country. As evidence to that importance, in 2019, the U.S. welcomed 79 million international visitors who

spent \$239 billion at local hotels, restaurants, attractions, and other travel businesses—leading international travel to be the U.S.’ largest service export category.

In South Florida, the Greater Miami and Miami Beach tourism industry has rebounded exceptionally well from the COVID-19 pandemic thanks in part to the robust recovery of Miami International Airport and our airport and aviation partners.

According to published data provided by the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, in 2021, 15.9 million overnight visitors and an additional 8.3-million-day visitors totaling 24.2 million came to the area, which essentially matched the total volume of tourists seen in 2019. Furthermore, visitor spending rebounded, and tourists spent an estimated \$19.2 billion, an increase of 8% over 2019. Domestic visitation made up much of the overall deficit created by a lack of visitors from Europe and Canada, but Latin American markets filled in a sizable gap in international visitation. While travel bans continued to be in place in many regions across the globe, relatively few existed in the Caribbean, Central and South America. Collectively, these markets made up the bulk of international visitation

Recommendations for Continued Recovery

So as the travel and tourism industry continue to recover, what is the main take-away from all this data, especially as it relates to international travel? Despite declining hospitalizations and infections, increased vaccination rates and a more robust public health system which is now better prepared to manage this or future viruses, many pandemic-driven federal policies are still in place. It is critical that we replace pandemic-era travel restrictions with endemic-focused policies that will enable travel to resume fully and freely.

MIA supports the following recommendations contained in a May 2022 industry letter to White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator and indorsed by over 260 travel and tourism organizations:

- Immediately remove the pre-departure testing requirement for all fully vaccinated inbound international arrivals.
- Ensure the federal mask mandate for public transportation remains lifted.
- End “avoid travel” advisories and the use of travel bans.
- Work with other countries to normalize travel conditions and entry requirements.
- Develop benchmarks and timelines for a pathway to the new normal that repeals pandemic focused travel restrictions.
- Send a clear message to the American public and the world that it is safe to travel again, particularly for vaccinated individuals.
- Work with Congress and the administration to modernize visitor visa processing.

Closing

Chairwoman Rosen, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your continued support and engagement on these efforts and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.