

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, TRADE AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to testify today on H.R.3232--the Travel Promotion Act of 2007.

I am Patrick Long, Director of the Center for Sustainable Tourism at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. I am also past chairman and past president of the National Rural Tourism Foundation (NRTF) authorized by Congress under the Tourism Policy and Export Promotion Act of 1992.

A number of years ago Charles Kuralt had a conversation with Douglas Duncan, newspaper editor of the Shelton, Nebraska "Clipper"¹. Duncan explained in that conversation how you know when you are in a small town. He started by noting that you know you are in a small town when "Third Street is on the edge of town". He went on to say that:

- You know you're in a small town if you're born on June 13th and your family receives gifts from the local merchants because you're the first baby of the year;
- You know you're in a small town if you dial a wrong number and talk for fifteen minutes anyway;
- You know you're in a small town if you can't walk for exercise because every car that passes you offers you a ride;
- You know you're in a small town if you write a check on the wrong bank and it covers it for you anyway;
- You know you're in a small town when the biggest business in town sells farm machinery; and, finally,
- You know you're in a small town if someone asks you how you feel and spends the time to listen to what you have to say!

My comments today are influenced by the many years I have spent living in and working with rural communities. From my childhood days growing up in Northfield, Minnesota, whose tourism logo is "Welcome to Northfield: Town of Cows, Colleges and Contentment" and which annually celebrates the "Defeat of Jesse James Days" to my thirty years initiating rural assistance programs in tourism and economic development in Colorado, to my current role as Director of the Center for Sustainable Tourism at East Carolina University. Throughout, my work has been dedicated to economic and community development in rural areas.

But I am here today primarily to offer a reminder that Congress formally recognized in 1992 the important role that tourism plays in economic development and revitalization of rural areas by enacting the National Rural Tourism Foundation. The legislation that created the NRTF was quite sound, creating an entity that could support community-based planning, tourism product

¹ On the Road With Charles Kuralt by Charles Kuralt. Fawcett Gold Medal, New York. Published by Ballantine Books, 1985.

development, coordinate training opportunities, provide information and resource dissemination, and address marketing and promotion of rural areas to the international visitor. This was done in direct partnership with many and varied Federal agencies in order to support economic development. Recognizing the potential for rural tourism, the Act noted:

1. “Many local communities with significant tourism potential are unable to realize the economic and employment opportunities that tourism provides because they lack the necessary local resources and expertise needed to induce tourism trade;
2. Increased efforts directed at promotion of rural tourism will contribute to the economic development of rural America and further the conservation and promotion of natural, scenic, historic, scientific, educational, inspirational, and recreational resources for future generations of Americans and foreign visitors; and,
3. Exporting those goods and services which United States industry can produce at a comparative cost advantage, such as travel and tourism services, will be in the Nation’s long-term strategic interest.”

In addition, the Act identified that the function of the Foundation shall be the “planning, development, and implementation of projects and programs which have the potential to increase travel and tourism export revenues by attracting foreign visitors to rural America”. Initially, such programs were to include:

1. “Participation in the development and distribution of educational and promotional materials pertinent to both private and public attractions located in rural areas of the United States, including Federal parks and recreational lands, which can be used by foreign visitors;
2. Development of educational resources to assist in private and public rural tourism development; and
3. Participation in Federal Agency outreach efforts to make such resources available to private enterprises, state and local governments, and other persons and entities interested in rural tourism development.

I draw your attention to these particular excerpts because they reinforce why I appear before you today. We at the Center for Sustainable Tourism (www.sustainabletourism.org) support the goals of H.R. 3232 and believe much can be done at the Congressional and agency levels to promote international visitor travel, and to streamline entry process. The provision of a coordinated clearinghouse of U.S. travel information and requirements in concert with important promotional components, have the potential to jumpstart stagnant inbound U.S. travel. As the United States strengthens its ties with China, such as obtaining *approved destination status*, we

have a greater opportunity to strengthen our markets to its outbound travelers – estimated by the U.S. Commercial Service to reach 100 million by the year 2020.

As has been well-documented in the justification for H.R. 3232, our country has long-suffered from the lack of a coordinated and well-funded international promotional effort that creates tourism jobs, revenue flow, and a positive balance of trade in tourism. International tourism expenditures are of great importance to the US economy— in my home state of North Carolina there were over 358,000 international visitors in 2007 generating expenditures of \$607 million.

First and foremost, the legislation you are considering provides for a competitive and substantial promotion and marketing program funded by international visitor fees. In addition, it authorizes the establishment of a non-profit Corporation for Travel Promotion governed by a non-government, private sector board of directors, under the oversight of the Department of Commerce. Such corporation would perform the important functions of explaining U.S. security policies, reversing negative perceptions of travel to the U.S. through public education, expand economic and diplomatic benefits of overseas travel across the U.S., and promote our country as a desirable and enjoyable travel destination. All are important functions.

Recognizing the importance of reinvigorating the flow of international tourists who, research has shown, are interested in experiencing the natural, cultural and heritage destinations of rural America, I come before you today as Past Chairman of the National Rural Tourism Foundation (www.ruraltourism.org). I am here to make the case for those rural communities that are not currently a visible part of our Country's tourism product and would benefit significantly from tourism as an economic revitalization tool. My comments today, therefore, are not so much about the legislation before us, which appears to be strongly supported by the tourism industry, as well as by an impressive number in Congress, but rather to ask you to be fully mindful of the needs of rural America as you consider any tourism legislation.

I would like to take a moment to share with you a rural tourism scenario. On the eastern plains of Colorado, a short distance from the Kansas border on the Interstate 70 corridor in Kit Carson County lies the rural community of Burlington, Colorado--population 3,678. In an effort to increase revenues for the community, Burlington began exploring ways to improve retail sales through tourism and to decrease the dependence of existing tourism attractions on public tax dollars for their operation. Results of a study conducted by the NRTF in partnership with the

University of Colorado indicated that tourism product development guided by a long-range marketing plan could significantly increase both retail sales and lodging taxes for the city.

The tourism related sectors in Kit Carson County play an important role in that region's economy. Combined, the accommodations and food services sector, and the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors make up over 11% of the total employment in the county, while providing 4.5% of the total wages. Tourism-related employees in Kit Carson County account for 33% of the total tourism related employees in a five-county region and 33.2% of total tourism related wages.

The cost of living in the county has increased at a rate greater than per capita income over the last decade. Thus, the average citizen is less well off than they were in 1990. Although Burlington still serves as a regional service center for some industries, the small population base and weak population growth coupled with slow growth of employment, income and wages, suggests that the local area will have long-term difficulty in attracting new businesses based on internal demand. Unless a major high-wage employer can be recruited to the area, revenue enhancement can best be accomplished through drawing business from outside the immediate area.

The City of Burlington is extremely fortunate it has an interstate highway directly adjacent to the community. Additionally, a Colorado Welcome Center, serving a full 10% of all travelers on I-70, is also a critical economic asset. Capitalizing on these two opportunities is absolutely vital to the long-term economic viability of that community.

The NRTF study recommended that the community move immediately to develop a long-term vision and plan of action for tourism development, at the same time identifying funding sources to support three phases of development. Phase one would include a comprehensive signage plan that includes I-70, the east and west entrances from I-70, and connections between 14th Street, Rose Avenue and Lincoln Street. This first phase also called for the development of a safe and appealing corridor that visually integrates the retail businesses in downtown with the pathway between Old Town and the Carousel, once featured in a National Geographic special. Most critically, beginning with this phase, the accommodations, food services, and retail sectors were to be recruited to participate actively in the tourism planning process.

Phase Two would focus on the business-to-business linkages that would help the community capitalize on every traveler who exits I-70, and that will energize merchants to actively and

collectively contribute to market growth. Redesign of the town website, construction on the main street tourism corridor, and directional signage all needed to communicate to travelers that Burlington balances the modern life of an agricultural community with respect for its rich historic and natural assets.

Phase Three recommended that an agricultural hall of education be developed at the community's historic tourism anchor, Old Town, which would feature contemporary agricultural practices and offer interactive experiences that will have a strong appeal to youngsters.

As you are aware, tourism development is of great importance to the economic survival of many rural communities and there are few states in the U.S. without a substantial number of such communities struggling economically that wouldn't benefit from assistance in their tourism planning, implementation, and promotion. For example, in the Eastern third of North Carolina, within the immediate service area of East Carolina University and our Center, I regret to report that 22 of 41 counties are classified as Tier I, the lowest economic classification.

Rural communities such as the example of Burlington, Colorado, can benefit from proven planning examples and access to rural tourism information resources, technical assistance, training opportunities, business development techniques, funding ideas and sources, marketing assistance, conferences and knowledge about, and access to, and existing federal programs, many of which they frequently are not even aware.

All along Route 66 which has its auspicious beginnings in the District represented by the Honorable Chairman Bobby Rush, we see the uniqueness of our countless national rural treasures at the many stopping points. These rural communities are the potential draw for thousands of tourists each weekend looking for a scenic ride, a good meal, comfortable lodging, or a unique shopping experience. They also can be better positioned to attract the expenditures of hikers, campers, sportsmen, motor coach travelers, and the general touring public, as well as benefit from the growing number of second home owners. In particular, these communities can build their capacity to serve the needs of our international visitors. And, such development must now be sustainable as we are seeing in the rebuilding of Greensburg, Kansas, a rural community devastated in 2007 by a tornado, in order for businesses and communities to decrease costs, increase profits, and compete in any future traveler marketplace.

Regarding sustainability, as director of a sustainable tourism center, I would be remiss not to emphasize the importance of responsible and sustainable actions by the tourism industry; every

tourism sector would benefit from embracing sustainable practices in an effort to save money, increase profits, or simply because it is in the best interests of the local, national and world environment. Such practices could include management and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, reduction of solid waste and water consumption, wastewater management, conservation and management of energy (www.renewabletourism.org), ecosystem and biodiversity conservation, land use planning and management, air quality protection, preservation of social norms and cultures and provision of economic benefits to local and indigenous communities, responsible purchasing and training and education in sustainability for employees and clients. As the world's largest industry we have an obligation to positively impact individual traveler behaviors, business practice, and public policy at all levels to ensure that tourism's "footprint" is minimized. Major research initiatives on sustainable tourism are currently underway by PhoCusWright in partnership with Sustainable Travel International as well as by the Travel Industry Association of America to more accurately determine the marketplace, trends, and effects of such practices on business operations in tourism.

What I would ask today is that in addition to supporting the bill you have before you that you consider other ways to meet the unique needs and contributions of America's rural communities so they might more fully benefit from travel to the U.S. As one action, I would ask that you consider strengthening the capacity of the National Rural Tourism Foundation to meet its original purpose --to serve as a catalyst for the economic revitalization of rural America through tourism. *Although the Foundation was never publicly funded and consequently has been unable to reach its full potential, it stands ready to meet its goals should Congress see fit to revisit the Foundation's role and consider providing appropriate resources.*

Strengthening the Foundation will create opportunities to increase export earnings from tourism and transportation services traded internationally and will encourage the development of the tourism industry in rural communities which have been severely affected by the decline of agriculture, family farming, the extraction or manufacturing industries, or by the closing of military bases. Immediate beneficiaries include:

- Underdeveloped rural areas seeking economic revitalization through tourism development;
- Current residents of, and people relocating to, rural destinations either as business operators, second home owners or retirees;
- Producers/suppliers of outdoor recreation products;
- Transportation venues—rail, car, airline, bus and shuttles;

- Small tourism business/entrepreneurs;
- Real estate developers (golf, vacation homes, factory outlet malls);
- Lodging/Accommodations (small hotels, guest ranches, bed and breakfasts, and campgrounds);
- Planning consultants and technical assistance providers;
- Government units at the local, regional, and state levels.

In closing, I wish to share with you these reflections on rural America by Charles Wilkinson, Natural Resources Law Professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His remarks encapsulate the aura and mystique of the rural community experience:

“We need to develop what I call an ethic of place. It is premised on a sense of place, the recognition that our species thrives on the subtle, intangible, but soul-deep mix of landscape, smells, sounds, history, neighbors, and friends that constitute a place, a homeland. An ethic of place respects equally the people of a region and the land, animals, vegetation, water, and air. It recognizes that residents’² revere their physical surroundings and that they need and deserve a stable, productive economy that is accessible to those with modest incomes. An ethic of place ought to be a shared community value and ought to manifest itself in a dogged determination to treat the environment and its people as equals, to recognize both as sacred, and to insure that all members of the community not only search for, but insist upon, solutions that fulfill that ethic.”

Professor Charles Wilkinson: Beyond The Mythic West (p. 75)

² Original word was “westerner”.