

## Visa Policy and Fee Updates

### World Cup Task Force – Visa, Transportation, Tourism, and Communications Working Groups

- Step Forward
- High Impact

**Background:** On March 7, 2025, the Trump Administration launched the White House Task Force on the FIFA World Cup 2026. The Task Force is coordinating the work of Federal departments and agencies on planning and execution of the 2026 FIFA World Cup. U.S. Travel is engaging directly with the Task Force working groups on Visas; Transportation, Travel and Tourism; and Communications and Marketing. These working groups are focused on many of U.S. Travel’s top visa policy priorities, including lowering visa wait times, increasing visa processing capacity, streamlining the application process, communicating visa and entry requirements, and leveraging Brand USA to deliver a welcoming message to the world.

**U.S. Travel’s View:** The Task Force is bringing Presidential and White House focus on travel modernization and improvements. While work has just begun, U.S. Travel has an influential seat at the table to guide outcomes and deliver results that will last far beyond the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

**What we’re doing:** Members of the U.S. Travel team are participating in the various working groups on the Task Force to ensure the travel industry’s priorities are highlighted.

### FY26 Appropriations – Visa Wait Times

- Step Forward
- High Impact

**Background:** During Destination Capitol Hill, the industry advocated for \$491 million in appropriations for the State Department to reduce visa wait times. The House FY26 State and Foreign Operations [bill](#) included \$517 million to assist in reducing passport backlogs and visa wait times - \$26 million more than U.S. Travel requested. The Senate has not marked up its version of the bill.

Additionally, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [announced](#) during a Congressional hearing that the Administration is planning to put consular officers on double shifts and employ artificial intelligence to surge visa processing ahead of the World Cup. The State Department also [changed the Foreign Affairs Manual \(FAM\)](#) to allow FIFA match officials to travel to the U.S. on a B-1 business visa or Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA).

**U.S. Travel’s View:** These are important wins for the industry and U.S. Travel will continue to advocate for increased funding for visa processing as the appropriations process moves forward. The Administration clearly views lowering visa wait times as a priority – especially given the upcoming decade of U.S. hosted global events.

**What we’re doing:** U.S. Travel will continue to advocate for additional funding for visa processing to remain in any final government funding deal. U.S. Travel will also keep up pressure on the State Department to surge processing to lower wait times, streamline the process, and troubleshoot any issues ahead of the World Cup.

### Visa Integrity Fee (the ‘Travel Deterrence Fee’)

- Step Backwards
- High Impact (if implemented)

**Background:** In the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA), Congress directed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to charge a new Visa Integrity Fee (what we are calling the “Travel Deterrence Fee”) of at least \$250 on all nonimmigrant visa categories, other than ESTA. The Travel Deterrence Fee may be refundable, but only when a nonimmigrant visa expires or is renewed, and if the visa holder complies with all immigration laws. U.S. Travel successfully removed language in the OBBA requiring the fee to be implemented within a certain timeline. While

DHS has not provided its own timeline for implementation, some media reports indicate a potential implementation date of October 1, 2025.

**U.S. Travel's View:** The fee would make the upfront costs of a U.S. visitor visa among the highest in the world. In repeated surveys of international travelers, cost is consistently a top deterrent to visiting the U.S., and the Travel Deterrence Fee will only make matters worse. For example, the total visa fees for a family of four visiting from Brazil will be \$1,768 once the fee is implemented – a \$1,000 increase. According to Tourism Economics, even at the statutory minimum of \$250, the Travel Deterrence Fee would result in 3 million fewer visitors and cost the U.S. \$9 billion in visitor spending during President Trump's term.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel is aggressively urging the Administration and Congress to delay implementation of the Travel Deterrence Fee, and to enact legislation that eliminates or severely limits the application of the fee. This is a top advocacy priority for U.S. Travel.

### **ESTA Fee**

- Step Backwards
- Low Impact

**Background:** In the OBBB, Congress raised the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) fee, which VWP travelers pay to be vetted and approved for visiting the U.S., from \$21 to \$40 [starting](#) September 30, 2025. Due to this increase, a family of 4 coming from the United Kingdom will now pay \$188 in fees alone to travel to the U.S. – a 68% increase from current fees.

**U.S. Travel's View:** The \$19 ESTA fee increase is unlikely to deter significant volumes of travel to the U.S. However, the ESTA fee increase is another example that certain members of Congress are willing to use international visitors as a “pay-for” for unrelated government spending, while ignoring the economic and export benefits that international travel deliver.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel is lobbying Congress and the Administration to keep ESTA fee revenue tied to Brand USA and CBP improvements, and guard against any future ESTA fee increases.

### **Visa Bond Pilot Program**

- Step Backwards
- Low Impact

**Background:** On August 5, 2025, the State Department [announced](#) a 12-month visa bond pilot program under the Immigration and Nationality Act. Beginning August 20, 2025, certain applicants for temporary visitor visas (B1 – business or B2 – tourism) from countries with historically high overstay rates—10% or more—will be required to post a \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$15,000 bond at the discretion of consular officers. If the traveler complies with the visa terms, the bond will be returned.

**U.S. Travel's View:** This is not the first time the State Department has explored visa bonds. A similar six-month pilot program was authorized in 2020 but was paused due to COVID-19. This pilot's scope is limited, and the State Department expects only 2,000 visa applicants will be affected over the pilot. As of now, the bond only applies to visitors from Malawi and Zambia.

**What we're doing:** The State Department can add additional countries to the list after a 15-day notice. U.S. Travel is advocating for the pilot to remain small and focused on low-volume markets with high overstay risk.

### **Interview Waivers Continued for Tourists and Business Visas, Eliminated for Others**

- One Step Forward, One Step Backwards
- High Impact

**Background:** On July 25, 2025, the State Department [announced](#) that it will continue to allow interview waivers for low-risk temporary visitor visas renewals within 12-months of the prior visa's expiration, which means applicants will not need to visit a consulate or embassy to be interviewed by a consular affairs officer prior to approval. At the same time, the State Department announced that effective September 2, 2025, several categories of nonimmigrant visa applicants will no longer be eligible for interview waivers. All other nonimmigrant visa applicants, including those under the age of 14 and over the age of 79, will now require an in-person interview with a consular affairs officer, except low-risk visitor visa renewals. The State Department [updated](#) the July guidance on September 18 to add H-2A (temporary agriculture workers) to the list of those still eligible for a waiver.

**U.S. Travel's View:** Continuing waivers for visitor visa renewals will streamline the visa process for foreign visitors and increase international visitation to the U.S. It's also a sign that the Trump Administration is willing to pursue visa improvements tied to the World Cup and major sporting events. However, requiring all other nonimmigrant visas applicants to go to an in-person interview, including H-2B and J-1 applicants, will slow down the process for temporary foreign workers that the travel industry depends on.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel is lobbying Congress to expand visa processing capacity through increased appropriations, create a dedicated National Vetting Service to process visas and providing permanent interview waiver authority for low-risk nonimmigrant visa renewals.

### **Visa Waiver Program (VWP) Expansion**

- Step Forward
- High Impact

**Background:** The Administration is working to expand the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) to additional countries, which will grow international travel to the U.S. When new countries are added to the VWP, international visitation historically grows by an average of 40% or more within the first 5 years. The VWP enhances national security with greater information sharing between governments while facilitating increased travel for millions of potential visitors.

- On July 28, 2025 – Secretary Noem Kickstarts [Process](#) for Argentina to Rejoin Visa Waiver Program
- August 14, 2025 – Secretary of State Rubio, Paraguayan Foreign Minister Lezcano [MOU](#) for Cooperation
- September 16, 2025 – DHS [Removes](#) Restrictions on Hungary's Designation in the Visa Waiver Program

**U.S. Travel's View:** Expansion of the VWP is one of the fastest ways to enhance security and grow international inbound travel. Earlier in the year, we shared our recommendations for expanding the VWP with the Trump Administration and we welcome the progress that's being made. Further expansion of the VWP is a golden opportunity for the Administration to boost national security and the benefits of travel and commerce to the U.S. economy.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel is continuing to urge the Departments of State and Homeland Security to explore new VWP partnerships and lobbying Congress to expand entry ways into the program. U.S. Travel is also urging CBP to fully implement biometric exit – using funding we secured in the One Big Beautiful Bill – which has the potential to expand the VWP by more than 10 countries.

### **Visa interview appointments limited to countries of residence or nationality**

- Step Backwards
- Low Impact

**Background:** On September 6, the State Department directed all [directed all nonimmigrant visa applicants](#) to apply and interview in their country of residence or nationality – eliminating the COVID-era flexibility to allow applications and interviews anywhere in the world.

**U.S. Travel's View:** This COVID-era policy was put in place to allow nonimmigrant visa applicants to find a U.S. embassy or consulate in another country with lower interview wait times (outside their country of residence or

nationality). However, this policy was just a bandage for an underlying problem – astronomically high visa wait times. This policy change is not expected to broadly impact visitor visa applicants, since most apply and interview in their country of residence or nationality. However, the policy change could more acutely impact nonimmigrant temporary workers or student visa applicants (e.g., H-1B or H-2B).

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel remains focused on addressing the underlying systemic challenge of long visa wait times, so policies like this never have to be put in place again.

### **F-1 and J-1 Visa Changes**

- Step Backwards
- Low Impact

**Background:** On August 28, 2025, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [released](#) a proposed rule that would change the initial admission period for F-1 and J-1 students and scholars to match the program end date noted on their Form I-20 or DS-2019, not to exceed four years. DHS states the proposed changes will improve oversight, program integrity, and national security by removing the potential for indefinite stays and ensuring DHS can properly screen and vet visa holders on an ongoing basis.

**U.S. Travel's View:** This update could lead to additional financial and administrative burdens on our members who utilize the J-1 visa program.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel will continue to monitor and provide updates throughout the rulemaking process.

### **H-1B Visa Changes**

- Step Backwards
- Low Impact

**Background:** On September 19, the President signed a [proclamation](#) making changes to the H-1B nonimmigrant visa program. The H-1B visa allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations that require highly skilled knowledge—commonly in fields such as technology, engineering, and medicine. These visas are capped annually and are a key pathway for companies to fill roles where there is a shortage of qualified domestic workers. The proclamation requires the H-1B holder, or their corporate sponsor, to pay a \$100,000 fee for their visa. The fee will only apply to new applicants, not existing holders or renewals.

**U.S. Travel's View:** While the travel industry does not typically utilize H-1B visas for employees, it is another move by the Administration to decrease nonimmigrant visa issuance and could impact international travel.

**What we're doing:** U.S. Travel will continue to monitor and provide updates on any additional changes to nonimmigrant visa policy.