

Begich Calls for Expedited Tourist Visas to Bolster Economy

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Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

Last summer four United States Senators- including Alaska's Mark Begich- founded the Senate Travel and Tourism Caucus. Earlier this month Senator Begich visited Kodiak and talked briefly about how he and his colleagues are working to adapt U.S. travel visa policies to a changing world economy.

"The tourist visa, where people come and visit out country, it's a long process. In some countries it's much quicker. For example, in South Korea, when we changed the visa process there we increased out international travel from South Korea across the country 42 percent. Bam! Just like that, because it was easier. People are now in two countries-China and Brazil- their middle class is growing significantly and they want to travel, they want to go to unique places. Alaska is one of those places, but if it takes them six months to get a visa, they're not coming. They're going to pick some other exotic place or some other unique place. So we're working with the administration, they've been helpful in getting these timelines tighter. So if you're from Brazil and you want to come to the United States, want to come to Alaska, you'll be able to get your visa much quicker. That will increase our tourism business. Fifteen percent of Alaska's tourism business comes from foreign travelers. Foreign travelers stay longer and they spend more money and we like that."

Begich says part of the caucus's goal is to educate policy makers about the impact of tourism in a place like Alaska.

"Here's what I think people think about tourism when they're back in Washington, 'Well that tourism business, that's a low paying job, no one wants to work in that job, that's a starter job.' Well actually, it's a mix. There's a lot of young people who work in that industry and there's a lot of secondary components. When you come over to a forest service building there's guides there that want to guide you there. I met a gentleman here who has a lodge, for example. He does that as his career, that's his life. I think there's an undervalue of our tourism industry in this country and what we're trying to do- as one of the members and cofounders of the tourism caucus in the United States Senate- is bring a much larger awareness but also show that it's a really big industry and employs a wide range of types of folks in it."

In March, Senator Amy Klobuchar- who heads the tourism caucus- introduced the Jobs Originated through Launching Travel Act. The JOLT Act would expedite the processing of business and tourist visas, approve multiple-entry visas for qualified Chinese tourists and allow longer visits to the United States for some Canadian tourists.