

[By Dan McLean, Burlington Free Press](#)

Foreign tourists are a crucial part of Vermont's tourism industry, but the number of overseas visitors to the United States has been eroding over the past decade.

In a bid to reverse the trend, President Barack Obama signed the Travel Promotion Act into law Thursday. The measure is designed to provide a unified marketing approach to the world of the "U.S. brand" and boost tourism in all regions of the country.

Speaking a day before the bill was signed, Vicky Tebbetts, vice president of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce's Hospitality Council praised the legislation for doing away with a "fragmented" marketing effort.

"We needed a central office to communicate to international visitors to not only let them know that the U.S. has a great brand and it's great place to visit -- but that it's a safe place to be," she said, referring to safety concerns that cropped up after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The number of foreign visitors to the United States in 2009 was 9 percent below 2000 levels, according to The New York Times.

The Vermont Chamber could not say precisely how much foreign tourism in Vermont has fallen off, but expects the Green Mountain State to benefit from the national tourism campaign.

To Tebbetts, the U.S. brand conjures the following images: "It's fun. It's exciting. It's outdoors. It's diverse. And everyone knows Disney, of course."

Vermont is well-positioned to attract overseas tourists because the state has many assets foreign travelers are seeking, she said. "They are very interested in heritage, cultural tourism, outdoor experiences," Tebbetts said. "Many of the same things you think of when you think of Vermont."

Mike Shea, owner of the Spirit of Ethan Allen III cruise line on Lake Champlain, said foreign tourists are a healthy slice of his business -- and he has noticed a decline since 9/11.

"For us, here in Vermont, international tourism is a pretty good piece of what we do," Shea said.

If implemented properly, Shea said, the Travel Promotion Act will bring waves of visitors to New England and Vermont. "It could be something good -- if they don't build a bureaucracy around it," he said. "If they build a bureaucracy, we have done nothing."

After 9/11, Shea said, he saw a decline in foreign visitors "immediately."

In recent years, 5 percent to 8 percent of Shea's business has been international travelers. Before 9/11, it was substantially higher, he said. Then, some trips were "almost exclusively foreigners -- just one accent after another," he said.

"We were working with three British companies. They were dealing with seniors who got scared," Shea said, referring to the prospects of touring America after the al-Qaida attacks of 2001.

Foreign travelers were also put off by the hassle of increased security, Shea said.

Shea said his Lake Champlain cruises often have a healthy dose of British, French, German and Italian travelers. Most of the foreign travelers arrive in Vermont after touring Boston, which Shea called Vermont's "gateway."

The decline of tourism wasn't solely the consequence of heightened security and 9/11 attacks, Tebbetts said. Foreign tourists have been dissuaded to travel the U.S. because of a "domino effect" starting in 2001.

"We were attacked and, for the first time in a long time, the U.S. jumped into a war with Iraq and Afghanistan. ... Especially in Europe, there was a lot of disagreement in what we were doing," Tebbetts said.

Other countries also boosted efforts to grab larger shares of the tourist market.

The law

The law creates the Corporation for Travel Promotion, a nonprofit that will be funded with \$10 fees paid by foreign tourists. Those fees will be matched by contributions from the tourism sector, generating as much as \$100 million by 2014, Tebbetts said.

The measure is estimated to drive \$4 billion in new consumer spending annually, provide \$321 million in new federal tax revenue each year, and create 40,000 jobs nationwide, Tebbetts said.

The Vermont Chamber praised the state's congressional delegation, particularly Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., for helping pass the measure.

"During these difficult economic times we must do all we can to support Vermont's tourism industry," Welch said in an e-mail. "As Vermonters know, it doesn't take long to realize that our state is a special place. By telling the world about Vermont, this legislation will give a boost to a critical sector of Vermont's economy."

The Shelburne Museum, another popular Vermont spot for foreign travelers, also expects to benefit from increased international tourism.

"The Shelburne Museum has always been an international draw," museum spokeswoman Leslie Wright said, noting "our quilts are hugely popular among the Japanese."

"For us, people come to the Shelburne Museum and feel like they are getting the essence of New England because of the historic buildings and the folk art," she said. "It's all new to them. It explains our history."

A visiting delegation of travel agents from China last spring, for example, were fascinated by 220-foot steamboat Ticonderoga and European visitors are often dazzled by the art collection that includes five works by Claude Monet, she said.

Vermonters weren't the only ones pleased with law.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the Senate's majority leader, couldn't resist the temptation to tweet his excitement: "I just left the Oval Office where Pres. Obama signed the Travel Promotion Act into law. This is great news for NV!" he posted on Twitter on Thursday morning.

The National Restaurant Association hailed the measure, calling it "a significant achievement for the restaurant and hospitality industries."

Shea, who runs the cruises from Burlington, still had questions about how the program would work. "How is the money going to be spent? What's the bureaucracy? Until that is released, it's hard to gauge the value."

That said, he suspects there will be an upside for Vermont.

"Do I think Vermont will benefit from this? Yes. Because we are an international destination," he said "And the revenue spreads out between the restaurants, hotels and attractions."