



COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

June 18, 2020

GOV20-222

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Hafa Adai yan Tiroow from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)!

Your leadership through these complicated times for our country has been of tremendous assistance to the CNMI as we do what we can, with the assistance of our federal partners, to limit the spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in our community. In following your call for the resumption of the American economy, the CNMI has begun our efforts to follow suit in seeking ways to bring back commercial activity and regain the momentum we lost since the outbreak of this disease. I wish to thank you for the guidance and leadership on this movement to restart the American economy and would like to provide you with our blueprint for consideration and assistance.

Unlike many communities throughout the United States, the CNMI economy is heavily centralized on its single tourist sector. The tourism industry accounts for approximately half of total economic activity and nearly all non-public sector employment income. Naturally, with this reliance on international travel, our economy suffered greatly from the global collapse of tourism. Yet, through the assistance offered by the federal government, alongside the commitment of our local healthcare and first responders, we have made phenomenal progress in containing the spread of COVID-19 in our community, created one of the largest testing programs per capita in the nation, and saved countless number of lives.

We feel that we are in a stable position to once more resume economic activity and resuming international flights is key to doing so in any meaningful way.

The CNMI's location and proximity to Asia has historically been a strong factor in enticing tourists from Japan, South Korea, and China. In recent years, tourist arrivals from South Korea have represented the majority of our monthly and annual arrivals, and the South Korean tourist market is of significant economic value to our economy and the U.S. jobs present within it. It is my hope that the resumption of flights from South Korea will be the first step in resuming economic activity in the CNMI and allow for a system that can be replicated throughout our other tourism markets.

The Blueprint we have in place for the resumption of international flights from South Korea is built upon the strength of our community-testing initiatives currently in effect along with our network of COVID-19 monitoring and incident response developed in partnership with our Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation (CHCC), the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

To date, the efforts of this program have resulted in only 30 positive cases of COVID-19 while initial estimates saw our peak infections reaching in excess of 6,000. I am also pleased to inform you that through our community-based testing initiatives, we have successfully tested over 15% of our population.

Building upon these strengths, we seek to reestablish travel linkages with South Korea that will require each visitor to present, upon checking into their flight, certification of a negative COVID-19 test result produced within the preceding 72-hour period. We are in the process of instituting modifications throughout our tourism corridors to enhance monitoring and risk mitigation efforts among employees and residents, and we seek to establish channels of communication with the health officials of our source markets to ensure that if a health concern arises among their citizens while in the CNMI, all protocols necessary will be taken and respected.

The federal government and the CNMI government are key partners in our tourism industry. Under your leadership, the CNMI economy has truly been given the opportunity to grow. We look forward to once more being productive members of the American economic community as we rise from the ramifications of this pandemic.

Your support of this effort and any additional assistance you can provide as our government navigates toward resumption of international flights in the coming months, is greatly appreciated.

Should you have any questions or concerns relating to our interest in resuming international tourism, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



RALPH DLG. TORRES
Governor

Tourism Resumption Blueprint

Introduction

Tourism is the lifeblood of the economy for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The reliance on tourism to stimulate economic activity has resulted in a severe collapse of the economy following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). In the current environment it is clear that the primary way to recover economic activity, provide resources for continuity of private sector employment, and to support government revenue for critical government services is to chart a path toward the resumption of the tourism industry within this fiscal year.

The resumption of tourism in the advent of the COVID-19 outbreak and in the absence of a proven vaccine for the disease is a complex challenge. Any plan that seeks to resume international flights to the Saipan International Airport must be aimed toward mitigating the potential spread of the disease among the local population, prevent visitors from contracting the disease while present in the CNMI, and establishes a framework to accomplish these goals while maintaining demand and affordability among the potential tourism market.

Tourism destinations across the world have begun this process through the creation of “Travel Bubbles” established through a combination of domestic infection mitigation measures and international agreements.

Tourism Resumption Blueprint

This Blueprint describes a partnership with CNMI government, private sector and the governments and travel partners in the international source countries to foster the resumption of tourism in the CNMI.

CNMI Government

- Establish a pathway for resumption of commercial activity based on results of the Community Testing Initiative
- Provide resources and guidance to private sector partners on COVID-19 mitigation protocols and safety precautions
- Continue community-wide testing and reestablish restrictions in the interest of safety for residents and visitors should concerns arise
- In partnership with the private sector, identify best practices and mechanisms for the allowance of international flights that will safeguard the health and safety of visitors and residents
- Foster agreements with international tourism industry partners
- Place health and safety of residents and visitors as a priority

- Institute reporting mechanisms between CNMI government and government's of source countries for incident reporting and monitoring

Private Sector

- Establish and enforce mitigation and safety precautions among all customer facing elements of their commercial operation
- Follow restrictions and protocols established by the CNMI government
- Ensure prompt reporting of health concerns to the proper health care authorities
- Take an active role in the monitoring and protection of visitors and domestic employees throughout the operation of tourism related commercial activities
- Maintain the appropriate licensure and certification to engage in commercial activity

Tourism Resumption Program

Core Principles

The following principles are the foundation for the decisions and plans to resume tourism activity with the CNMI:

- The CNMI will continue to utilize the available testing resources to collect infection data among individuals present in the islands.
- This data guides the actions of government and health care officials in determining the extent to which economic and community activity can be safely engaged.
- The resumption of tourism to the CNMI is to be sought in response to testing data that sufficiently provides clear indication of a diminished concern of the threat of infection among the population.
- Tourism activity will be centered on ensuring safety for all stakeholders and participants.

Core Elements

Expansion of CNMI Community Testing Initiative

The CNMI's unique capability to test large proportions of the domestic population is the foundation of efforts to resume commercial activity. The continuation and expansion of the Community Testing Initiative should be leveraged to ensure the safety of tourism stakeholders, employees and visitors to our islands. The lower prevalence of COVID-19 cases in the CNMI creates a safer environment for visitors. Ensuring a robust testing system for employees in direct contact with visitors ensures transmission of the disease can be mitigated both for the visitors and the domestic population.

Establishment of Safe Tourism Corridors

As much as possible, for the safety of visitors and residents, tourism corridors throughout the CNMI should be identified by health care officials.

Priority should be given to the resumption of activity within self-contained resort establishments as central nodes of the tourism corridor. Hotels with restaurants, entertainment and facilities within their premises will serve to ensure access to quality tourism products.

Tour packages, schedules, and accommodations primarily geared toward the tourism clientele should be cataloged by the CNMI government, and domestic employees of these establishments should be given testing priority to limit any potential infection.

Each element of the corridor should be staffed by employees with proper personal protective equipment.

Connecting Tourism Corridor with Community Monitoring

Each node of the corridor will serve as a monitoring point for the CNMI COVID-19 Task Force. At each establishment thermal monitoring and health screening shall be implemented and, in instances of health concern, the establishment will notify the COVID-19 Task Force of the incident and assist in the efforts to mitigate any harm. The COVID-19 Task Force is responsible for ensuring appropriate channels of communication are established between the separate nodes of the corridor and the appropriate monitoring system, as well as, educating tourism stakeholders of the appropriate safety protocols for containment.

Rapid Response Program

The COVID-19 Task Force and the CNMI Government should establish a rapid response program to respond to incidents of concern that arise from a monitoring point within the tourism corridor. Rapid and timely response to potential health risks will protect domestic employees and residents, as well as, other visitors in potential interaction with the disease. The tourism stakeholders will comply with the requirements for rapid response and assist in the containment of any incidents.

If the CNMI encounters an incident in which a visitor showcases symptoms or is found to be positive for COVID-19, the CNMI government will engage its existing protocol for containment and will immediately notify the visitor's country of origin through established channels.

Marketing Safe CNMI Tour Packages

As much as possible, international travel to the CNMI for the purposes of tourism should be marketed and booked through certified CNMI tour operators and progress through approved and safe tour packages. These packages should allow for the experience of the CNMI, while making every effort to mitigate any health concerns. Tour packages should be created in coordination with the Marianas Visitors Authority and the COVID-19 Task Force and can include hotel accommodations, restaurants, tourist attractions, beaches.

Tour and hotel operators are responsible for the monitoring and containment of their visitors and should maintain adequate and up to date records of the names and contact information for tour staff who are in regular contact with visitors.

Path Forward

For the partial resumption of tourism presented in this plan, a number of initial actions must be taken to increase demand during these uncertain times for the travel industry. First is the elimination of the quarantine requirement for incoming arrivals. The threat of importing COVID-19 via international travel can be mitigated through a three-pronged system:

1. Requirement for origin testing 72 hours prior to landing in the CNMI through presentation of a health certificate upon check in to the visitor's flight
2. Modification of existing tourism infrastructure to prioritize health monitoring and communication with health care system
3. Establishment of channels of communication with source countries to ensure timely and accurate information transfers between CNMI health officials and the governments of the visitor's origin

Each option presents separate impacts to demand for the CNMI as a tourist destination, but each will provide greater demand than continuing the requirement for 14-day quarantine upon arrival.

Further, the CNMI through the Commonwealth Ports Authority should seek out avenues to incentivize airlines to resume air service to the CNMI. At present, airlines will be forced to reduce total seat capacity to ensure adequate distancing of passengers. This reduced load factor decreases profitability of the flights. Resumption of air service at sufficient capacity to support the supply of tourism accommodations requires an abatement of costs associated with landing in the Saipan International Airport.