



January 25, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you today regarding your January 21, 2021 Executive Order Promoting COVID-19 Safety in Domestic and International Travel. As an organization that for 35 years has promoted public policy to encourage cross-border trade and travel, we offer our insight and experience as a resource to your administration as together the private and public sectors work to end the scourge of the pandemic while also protecting livelihoods.

The communities along our nation's borders with Canada and Mexico have been uniquely impacted by the pandemic that, since March 2020, has brought non-commercial cross-border travel to a halt. While currently defined by the United States, Canada, and Mexico as “non-essential,” such travel is anything but for the businesses that depend on customers from the neighboring country and for local governments whose sales tax bases rely on robust cross-border commerce. For many border businesses and border region governments, the pandemic has resulted in an economic calamity.

As your administration seeks to implement the Executive Order, the Border Trade Alliance would urge the following:

Continue to permit cross-border commercial truck traffic. Cross-border commercial traffic should be permitted to continue under regular inspection protocols and without additional health measures. Not only is there no indication that commercial trucks and their drivers have contributed to the spread of the virus, but supply chain continuity remains critical during this time to ensure the swift delivery of manufacturing inputs, medical equipment – including PPE, and consumer goods on which Americans rely. Particularly, a large percentage of the fresh fruits and vegetables on grocery store shelves and on restaurant menus right now is coming across our borders with Mexico and Canada. Disrupting the flow of commercial trucks would disrupt the U.S. food supply, leaving consumers facing empty shelves at grocery stores and limited menus at restaurants. Disruptions in cross-border trade risk additional harm to an already struggling economy.

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Ease cross-border travel restrictions. While we understand the previous administration's desire to limit the spread of Covid-19, the nearly yearlong travel restrictions have been implemented in an ad-hoc manner with little indication as to which data are being relied on to make such decisions, nor has there been any communication to the public and border stakeholders as to the criteria that would permit a resumption of travel. We believe that travel can begin again safely and responsibly, and we have been encouraged by early-stage discussions within the Department of Homeland Security to consider a regional approach to travel restrictions that take into account a particular area's infection rate and that encourage a closer working relationship between the federal government and its state and local counterparts.

We would, however, discourage any plan that would call for travelers to demonstrate proof of a negative Covid test, especially for trips limited to the border area for a short duration. Not only would such a requirement be too unwieldy and likely lead to congestion at the ports of entry due to the additional documentation requirement, but there is nothing more remarkable about a shopper crossing from Tijuana, Baja California into San Ysidro, California to purchase groceries than there is about a shopping trip across town in any American community; neither is likely to contribute to the spread of Covid if normal public health protocols like mask-wearing and social distancing are followed.

At a minimum, the BTA believes the Department of Homeland Security should communicate to the public on a regular and consistent basis the scientific data it is relying on to drive decisions around border restrictions and what metrics must be achieved to resume travel.

Prioritize vaccine distribution among Customs and Border Protection officers. We salute our CBP officers who each day protect the country from those who would seek to do harm, interdict contraband, and who also facilitate lawful trade and travel, including CBP Agriculture Inspectors who facilitate the movement of fresh produce critical for the U.S. food supply. Since CBP officers are at the ports of entry and have a high degree of interaction with the public, we believe they ought to be prioritized for vaccination. Currently, local border communities are attempting to vaccinating CBP officers from their local vaccine allocations. However, federal CBP officers were often not included in calculations by states for vaccine distribution allocations. This leaves many rural communities to vaccinate a large federal workforce on a limited supply of vaccines due to population-based allocations and not prioritization-based allocations. This means CBP officers are being vaccinated at a significantly slower pace than the national average because of low availability, and other members of local essential workers are not being vaccinated at all because there is not adequate vaccine allocation for border communities to vaccinate both federal and local essential populations.

Maintain regular contact and consultation with Mexico and Canada. We applaud the Executive Order's call for diplomatic outreach to Canada and Mexico. The BTA encourages all three countries to maintain open lines of dialogue that are focused on maintaining commerce, preventing disruptions to supply chains and manufacturing, resuming travel, and controlling the virus' spread. We hope the views of organizations like ours are reflected in any final decisions.

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Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. We recognize the tremendous challenge before your administration as we strive to accelerate vaccine distribution and end this pandemic. Your administration can count on the Border Trade Alliance and our private and public sector members as ready and willing partners in this effort.



Sergio Contreras
Chair



Britton Mullen
President

CC: Hon. Alejandro Mayorkas
Hon. Pete Buttigieg
Hon. Gina Raimondo