

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105967](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in 2019—prior to the COVID-19 pandemic—the U.S. travel and tourism industry generated \$2 trillion in economic output, supporting 9.9 million American jobs. While many agencies share responsibilities for supporting travel and tourism, in recent years, Congress has increased DOT's responsibilities in this area.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act includes a provision for GAO to review DOT's support for travel and tourism. This report examines (1) the extent to which DOT's grant programs support travel and tourism; and (2) the challenges DOT faces in supporting travel and tourism, and how DOT might address these challenges.

GAO reviewed pertinent statutes as well as DOT strategic planning and grant documentation. In addition, GAO interviewed DOT officials, representatives of 14 industry groups, and officials from state DOTs and tourism boards in eight selected states. GAO selected these states to obtain diversity in geographic region and in the share of travel and tourism in states' economies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to DOT: (1) develop goals related to travel and tourism and incorporate them into its *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, and (2) develop a plan to identify and obtain additional data on travel and tourism needed to revise and implement the *Plan*. DOT concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105967](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Repko at (202) 512-2834 or repkoe@gao.gov.

May 2023

TRAVEL AND TOURISM

DOT Should Improve Strategic Planning and Data Collection

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation (DOT) provides grant funding to state, local, and tribal governments, among other entities, to support travel and tourism. According to DOT officials, six grant programs have specific travel and tourism related provisions. For example, the National Scenic Byways Program can fund eligible projects on roads with outstanding scenic, historic, or other qualities, including improvements to accommodate increased tourism. In fiscal year 2022, DOT made about \$5.6 billion available for these six programs. Of this amount, DOT provided \$810 million to projects selected in part for their travel and tourism benefits. DOT and stakeholders also identified 19 other DOT grant programs that did not have specific travel and tourism provisions, but funded projects with travel and tourism benefits. DOT made nearly \$68 billion available for these 19 programs in fiscal year 2022. These programs may support travel and tourism by, for example, expanding transportation capacity or enhancing connectivity between different types of transportation, such as airplanes and public transit.

Highway 12 in Utah, an Example of a National Scenic Byway



Source: Venemama/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-105967

GAO identified two key challenges that limit DOT's ability to support travel and tourism: a lack of specific goals and comprehensive data. DOT's *National Travel & Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan* for fiscal years 2020–2024 aims to articulate a strategic vision for making the U.S. travel and tourism industry more competitive globally. The plan identifies some general strategies and best practices for supporting travel and tourism, but does not contain strategic goals specifically related to this area. Without specific goals, it is not clear what DOT intends to achieve through its efforts. Moreover, while DOT has acknowledged the importance of using data to inform its efforts, DOT has not collected comprehensive data specifically on travel and tourism, such as on the purpose of trips, travel party size, and transportation modes used. Without such data, DOT may not be able to make informed decisions when implementing activities in support of any travel and tourism goals it identifies.