

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, D.C.

January 29, 2021

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

Dear President Biden,

We write following your January 21, 2021 Executive Order on *Promoting COVID-19 Safety in Domestic and International Travel*, in which you direct members of the Cabinet to submit a plan within 14 days to implement appropriate public health measures at land ports of entry. As members representing congressional districts along the U.S. Northern Border, we urge your Administration to prioritize working with the Canadian government to increase the number of essential traveler exceptions to current border restrictions and establish a plan, guided by public health metrics, upon which the United States – Canada land border will be re-opened to non-essential travel.

On March 20, 2020, the U.S. and Canada first announced that non-essential travel across the U.S. – Canada land border would be temporarily restricted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 between the two nations. These restrictions have been extended by 30-day increments throughout the course of the pandemic, with the most recent extension leaving the restrictions in place through February 21, 2021. Importantly, both countries recognized the vital need to maintain cross-border supply chains and allow essential workers to continue traveling across the border unimpeded, preserving our close economic partnership during these unprecedented times.

Binational cooperation to minimize the risk presented by COVID-19 and prioritize the safety of our communities remains of utmost importance while the U.S. and Canada work to overcome this public health crisis. However, as we approach one year of restricted travel, we also must recognize the significant impact these restrictions have had on individuals, families, businesses, and communities on both sides of the border. The continued ritual of monthly extensions without substantive signs of collaboration or progress only increases uncertainty and amplifies hardship for the border communities we represent – including those on U.S. soil accessible only through cross-border transit. Since the onset of the restrictions, we have been adamant that preserving the deep social and economic bond shared between the U.S. and Canada necessitates a clear pathway forward.

As our nation works to emerge from this crisis, we respectfully request that you make bilateral collaboration on safely reopening the U.S. – Canada land border an immediate priority. Specifically, we urge your Administration to carefully consider the following actions:

## **Establish a Bilateral Plan for Restoring Travel**

States and Provinces in the U.S. and Canada have created frameworks for reopening that rely on monitoring public health data, the expertise of health officials, and other defined criteria to inform government decisions on how to proceed with each phase of a reopen, providing transparency and alleviating uncertainty for residents. We have long advocated for both nations to similarly craft a comprehensive framework for a phased reopening of the border that would be guided by clearly established public health metrics to measure conditions on both sides of the border. In their January 12<sup>th</sup> announcement extending the travel restrictions, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) laid out specific conditions that could be used to ease restrictions in the future, including the degree of health risk indicated in the Center for Disease Control's Travel Health Notice for Canada and Mexico, the public health conditions in the relevant border localities, and the staffing levels of local Border Patrol Officers. While there has been a necessary emphasis on implementing appropriate health protocols to ensure safe international air travel, cross border land travel deserves equal attention and deliberation on appropriate protective public health measures to ensure the safety of populations on both sides of the border and in finding solutions to the operational challenges presented at land ports of entry should travel be expanded. We urge your Administration to build on the January 12<sup>th</sup> guidance and work with Canadian officials to formally establish a bilateral plan to reopen the border to non-essential travel.

## **Prioritize Vaccines and Testing for All CBP Staff**

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) staff come to work on America's front line to keep our communities safe, so prioritizing their protection from COVID-19 is critical to prepare our land borders for restarting non-essential travel. CBP must continue to have access to appropriate personal protective equipment to continue to carry out their mission of facilitating lawful travel and trade. In addition, widespread screening and testing for COVID-19 should be conducted to monitor and adjust for staffing at each land port of entry. We understand that DHS has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for vaccine distribution to the CBP workforce, though personnel outside of a 200-mile radius from a VA hospital are currently unable to be assigned an appointment for the vaccine. While CBP field offices have been working diligently with local public health officials to fill gaps and get all personnel vaccinated as quickly as possible, we urge your Administration to work with the relevant agencies to address this issue and ensure all CBP staff are able to get vaccinated.

## **Allow for Families to Safely Reunite**

Families in border communities have faced unique hardship while they have been unable to cross the land border to reconnect with the loved ones on the other side. Since the travel restrictions were first implemented, Canada has expanded their exemptions to allow family members and extended family members to enter Canada to reunite with their family. Unfortunately, the U.S. has not reciprocated this policy, despite the fact that Canadians are still able to fly into the U.S., resulting in restrictions that fall squarely on families in border communities and those who lack the means to travel by air, while doing little to protect public health. The U.S. – Canada border has operated efficiently because of coordination and seamless processes crafted by both

governments working in tandem - reciprocating family travel exemptions continues in that tradition of coordination and lessens uncertainty for families approaching the border just seeking to reunite with loved ones. We urge your Administration to immediately establish and publicize a family travel exemption similar to the Canadian policy.

### **Develop a Policy for Property Owners**

For the many Americans that own property in Canada, the travel restrictions have prevented them from crossing the border to properly maintain their property. While they still pay taxes on such properties, these individuals and families have been blocked from accessing their homes to conduct necessary maintenance or retrieve their belongings. Traveling by car directly to their property to quarantine in isolation could be done without any contact or transmission risk. Additionally, proof of a negative COVID-19 test prior to crossing the land border could provide further protection against spread of the virus, while restoring the rights of individuals to visit their property. We urge your Administration to work with Canadian officials to develop an exemption process and appropriate safety protocols to allow property owners to cross the border.

### **Ensure Reciprocal Access to Transit through Boundary Waters**

Under standard policy, recreational boaters that leave a U.S. port and travel into international or foreign waters but do not make a stop before returning to a U.S. port are not considered to have departed the U.S. While CBP has continued to allow Canadian boaters to transit through U.S. waters during the pandemic as long as they don't anchor, dock, or tie up, consistent with this longstanding policy, we've been informed that Canada has not reciprocated this policy. This has been particularly impactful in the boat tourism industry, where Canadian operators have been able to take their tour boats along the U.S. coast while American tour boats have not been able to travel similar routes along the Canadian coast. Additionally, enforcement of the policies remains unclear and inconsistent. We urge your Administration to work with the relevant agencies to ensure the U.S. and Canada implement reciprocal policies that allow recreational boaters to transit through the other nation's boundary waters, as such activity provides no additional risk of cross-border virus transmission.

We hope the special partnership that exists between the U.S. and Canada and our legacy of close cooperation can lead to swift bilateral action towards restoring cross border travel while continuing to protect the health of our communities.

We appreciate your consideration of these requests and stand ready to assist in your efforts.

Sincerely,



Elise M. Stefanik  
Member of Congress



Brian Higgins  
Member of Congress



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Peter Welch  
Member of Congress



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Chris Jacobs  
Member of Congress



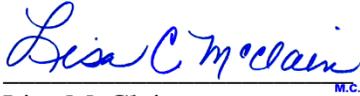
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Glenn Grothman  
Member of Congress



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Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress



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Lisa McClain  
Member of Congress



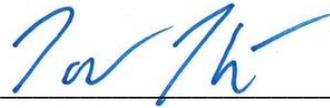
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Pete Stauber  
Member of Congress



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Tom Reed  
Member of Congress



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John Katko  
Member of Congress



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Kelly Armstrong  
Member of Congress



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Russ Fulcher  
Member of Congress



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Robert E. Latta  
Member of Congress



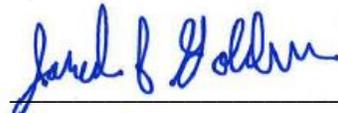
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Cathy McMorris Rodgers  
Member of Congress



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Jim Hagedorn  
Member of Congress

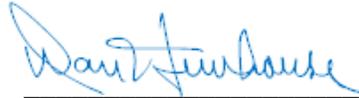


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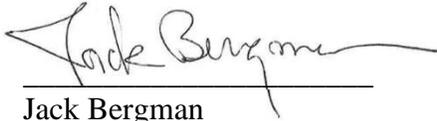
Jared Golden  
Member of Congress



Michelle Fischbach  
Member of Congress



Dan Newhouse  
Member of Congress



Jack Bergman  
Member of Congress



Dean Phillips  
Member of Congress



Tom Emmer  
Member of Congress



Steve Stivers  
Member of Congress



Debbie Dingell  
Member of Congress



Elissa Slotkin  
Member of Congress