



Travel: The Ultimate Economic Stimulus

*By Hardy Watkins, Executive Director
Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department*

How do we keep Oklahoma's economy moving in the right direction? That's a question under debate here – and all across the nation. Part of the answer may be simpler than you think. Investing in tourism and our state's travel economy is easy to implement, universally accepted and yields proven positive results.

Travel and tourism is one of our most important economic engines, creating jobs and stimulating spending across all of Oklahoma's 77 counties.

Nationally, travel is responsible for \$704 billion in direct spending, 7.4 million direct jobs, \$186 billion in payroll and \$111 billion in tax revenue. There are few industries that can compete with this kind of output.

The story is similar locally. Here in Oklahoma, travel is responsible for 76,200 jobs, \$6.1 billion in economic activity, and \$953.4 million in tax receipts.

Simply put, when people travel, the economy grows, jobs are created, and the tax coffers are filled. So how can we invest in this precious resource, and leverage it to bring our economy back? Here are a few ideas.

Support our state park system. Last summer while national travel fell by 3 percent, Oklahoma's state parks saw a slight increase with more than 12.2 million visitors. Facility improvements in the cabins, campgrounds, lodges and nature centers are key to staying market competitive and providing quality experiences to travelers. That said, the economic downturn and state budget cuts are impacting growth and revenue potential.

Market to out-of-town visitors. The saying goes, it takes money to make money. The Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department is the only agency promoting the state to a national consumer audience. It is critical we continue to get our message out to potential visitors. Oklahoma's "Native America" tourism advertising campaign is one of the most recognized in the nation and studies show the more people exposed to our advertising, the more travel spending increases in the state.

Attract international visitors. When people travel from other countries, they tend to stay longer and spend more when they are here. This can be a windfall for our local retailers and other small businesses. A national communications and marketing program called the Travel Promotion Act was just passed, which will invest in marketing to these visitors – which is great news for Oklahoma. On the state level, research shows for every dollar Oklahoma spends on international marketing, we receive a \$21 return on investment.

Roll out the welcome mat. Invite out-of-town friends and family for a visit and show off what makes your community unique. Every corner of the state has something worth exploring and celebrating, so whether you enjoy outdoor recreation, art galleries, world-class museums, guest ranches, wineries or something else, make plans now to explore Oklahoma's many attractions.

This week is National Travel and Tourism Week. I encourage you to make sure Oklahoma benefits from your travel spending this summer. It's more important than ever.