

Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau (March 18, 2021)

Opening Statement Text

Good morning Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Chris Barrett. I am representing the Pocono Mountains Visitors Bureau, located in the Pocono Mountains and charged with marketing our beautiful destination. Officially the destination is comprised of the counties of Wayne, Pike, Monroe and Carbon. Our total land area is 2,400 square miles, which is about the size of the State of Delaware. The natural beauty of our numerous streams, rivers and mountains is unsurpassed, and we offer a wide variety of attractions. To name just one example, the Pocono Mountains is home to one the nation's largest indoor waterparks, Kalahari.

Tourism is and always has been a staple for the region. In 2019, the industry generated \$4.2 billion in spending and hosted 29 million guests. More importantly, we employed over 37,500 people (4,500 in Carbon County) which accounted for 65% of the labor income in the region, making it the #1 industry. From a tax generation standpoint, our industry provided \$518 million in federal, state and local taxes for that year.

As you know, 2020 saw some very difficult times. We project that our overall revenues declined year-over-year by at least 35% or approximately \$1.4 billion. This decline affects not only our region but also the state as a whole: taxes will likely decline by the same proportion, a loss of \$181 million in Pennsylvania tax revenue.

The ray of hope that we have seen throughout this pandemic is the unfailing determination, innovation and grit of our people living and working day to day in the Poconos. They have faced incredible odds and endured. Businesses in the Poconos slowly and safely have reopened and begun to recover from the shutdown.

During 2020, we noted a resurgence and rediscovery of our outdoor assets. Our local, state and national parks have been and are being utilized to their capacity daily. A new term emerged, the "quarantine pod," representing a safer way for guests to vacation. Our guests have realized that they can visit us, with family, and enjoy activities that are naturally social distanced.

The importance of our rivers cannot be overstated. Without the Delaware, the Lehigh and our many creeks and streams, the Pocono Mountains would be missing a part of its heart and soul. Not only do our friends and neighbors earn their living from these tributaries, but tens of thousands of guests each year enjoy both the peace and the adventure they offer. If our rivers continue to thrive, we will survive.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.