

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Gus Bilirakis
CPAC Subcommittee Hearing on
“The Fiscal Year 2022 Department of Commerce Budget”
June 8, 2021

As prepared for delivery

Good morning Madam Chair, thank you for holding this hearing and welcome, Secretary Raimondo to the Energy and Commerce Committee. First and foremost, congratulations on your confirmation to the Department of Commerce (DOC). We appreciate you taking the time to appear before us, albeit virtually, to discuss several important topics before the subcommittee.

As you know, the DOC covers a broad range of issues including the innovation and deployment of emerging technologies, foreign investment into American companies, reinforcement of our critical supply chains, and enhancement of our nation’s cybersecurity, the latter of which we know is taking on greater importance every day.

Madam Secretary, we take the broad issue areas of your department very seriously and understand the benefits they pose to our economy. That’s why I am hopeful you will uphold its mission - to create conditions for economic growth and opportunity in our great nation.

Your appearance before us could not come at a more crucial time. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the need to embrace the mission of the DOC. We must accelerate American leadership in traditional and emerging technologies, enhance job creation, and strengthen U.S. economic and national security. Failure to do so will have devastating consequences.

I believe this hearing is a step in the right direction. There are many challenges that lay ahead of us while we work towards recovery from this pandemic. One of the hardest hit sectors was our travel and tourism industry, and we must not overlook the work that must be done to restore this powerful engine of economic growth for our communities across the nation.

Last congress, this subcommittee held a hearing on the Brand USA Extension Act. I was proud to introduce this legislation with my good friend Peter Welch and to lead the effort to get it enacted as part of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act. While it extended the Brand USA program through 2027, no one anticipated what the pandemic would do to our country, nor to the mechanics of this small but critical program.

In preparation for this hearing, I remembered back to that day where each of us were able to boast about great businesses and tourist attractions in our districts, the national parks, wineries, and of course Florida's beaches. Every single one of us can point to a special place in our districts as a great destination for tourists to come visit. But for over a year now, this travel has stopped.

This once flourishing market brought millions of international travelers to our districts, contributed billions of dollars to local economies, and created countless American jobs. Sadly, this virus has reduced spending in the industry by over 43% in 2020 and during that span international travel to the US fell by over 80%.

My fear is Brand USA won't be able to lead our country through international travel recovery because of the absence of matching funds from the private sector. For this reason, I am working on legislation to address this gap, and

hope and I can work with you Madam Secretary and my fellow colleagues here today on seeing that effort through.

While the pandemic paused travel, it did lead to a surge in traffic on e-commerce, which provided essential goods and services to seniors, those with disabilities, and underserved communities. This showed the ingenuity and adaptability of the American people to overcome adversity. However, we must work to ensure this space is not a venue for bad actors to take advantage of our constituents. I do think there should be safeguards in these marketplaces to ensure consumers are protected by best practices. I know this is an issue you are passionate about, Madam Chair, and I look forward to working with you to identify possible solutions.

As I said before, there are many challenges ahead of us as we start to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. I am hopeful this hearing serves to move us forward in addressing these challenges and growing our great economy together.

I look forward to hearing the Secretary's testimony, and I yield back.