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Senate panel approves lifting Cuba travel ban

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A Senate panel easily approved a spending bill amendment on Thursday that would lift a travel ban preventing American tourists from flying to Cuba.

Prior to advancing the fiscal 2017 spending bill for financial services and general government, the Senate Appropriations Committee adopted four separate amendments related to travel and trade with Cuba.

One amendment approved by voice vote would prohibit federal funds from being used to restrict air travel to Cuba. The language is backed by Sens. [Patrick Leahy](#) (D-Vt.), [Dick Durbin](#) (D-Ill.) and [Jerry Moran](#) (R-Kan.).

Another amendment, also endorsed by voice vote, would allow international flights traveling to or from Cuba to refuel at Bangor Airport in Maine. Flights currently have to refuel in Canada instead of the U.S. because of restrictions mandated by the trade embargo on Cuba.

“Reopening travel relations with Cuba is about more than just restoring the freedom to travel there for all Americans,” Durbin said in a statement. “While we have to be realistic about the prospects of this Congress fully lifting the embargo on Cuba, today’s committee votes were solid steps in the right direction.”

The move comes just a week after the Department of Transportation [announced](#) it was authorizing six airlines to begin commercial flights to Cuba this fall.

The Transportation and State Departments agreed to re-establish scheduled air service

between the U.S. and Cuba as part of the administration's push to normalize relations with the country.

But tourists are still not eligible to fly to Cuba. Currently, travel is only permitted for family visits, official U.S. government business, foreign governments, journalistic activity, professional research, educational activities, religious activities, public performances, humanitarian projects and certain authorized export transactions.

"The federal government shouldn't be in the business of policing Americans' vacation plans," said James Williams, president of Engage Cuba. "The travel ban is inconsistent with our values as a free society and I'm glad the Senate Appropriations Committee made it overwhelmingly clear they want that to change."

Senators adopted provision on a 22-8 vote that would repeal a requirement that any U.S. vessel entering a port in Cuba must obtain a license to load or unload freight in the U.S. within 180 days. It would also allow American farmers to extend private financing for exporting agricultural commodities to Cuba.

The panel also approved an amendment by voice vote that would permit consumer communication devices or telecommunications services to be exported to Cuba.

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