Sea of visitors turns tide for state tourism

Record $16.5B aids rebound

By Bruce Smith
Associated Press

CHARLESTON — South Carolina's tourism industry has bounced back after the Great Recession with tourism spending reaching a record $16.5 billion, according to figures released Saturday by the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

"We're pretty well back now," said Duane Parrish, director of the state agency. The numbers released to The Associated Press show that, during 2011, tourism spending was up almost 10 percent and has surpassed the previous record $15 billion of 2008.

"I think pent-up demand is part of it," Parrish said "People get to the point where they either feel better about the economy or decide they are in a new economy but they are going to travel anyway."

The release of the figures, from the U.S. Travel Association, generally lags about a year behind the year in which they were compiled.

The numbers show that the industry in 2011 provided 111,000 direct jobs statewide. The data also indicate that about 53 percent of tourism spending that year came from visitors from other states and 5 percent from international travelers.

From 1990 to 2008, the state tourism industry enjoyed average growth of about 4 percent a year. The recession started in late 2007, but the impact wasn't immediate, and 2008 was a record year for the industry. But in 2009, tourism was off 8 percent.

Now the industry seems to have recovered, growing in 2011 even faster than before the 18-month recession, which officially ended in June 2009. But Parrish said he isn't sure the current rate of growth can be sustained.

"I don't know that we will continue at 10 percent each year," Parrish said. "But I think things will be on the positive side and we will have steady growth the next two or three years."

Brad Dean, president and CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, called lower gas prices a good sign but added that "many consumers are still faced with economic uncertainty and increased payroll withholding."

Myrtle Beach is the heart of the state's tourism industry, where an estimated 14 million visitors a year flock to the area's beaches, 100-plus golf courses and 1,700 restaurants.

"Myrtle Beach has seen an increase in tourism in the last few years in large part to more promotion and new air service," he said. "Despite continued economic uncertainty, consumers are still traveling, and affordability is the key."

During the past two weeks, new direct flights between Myrtle Beach and Philadelphia, Baltimore and Toronto have started. Earlier this year, Myrtle Beach opened a larger and renovated $113 million airport terminal.

Parrish said that while overall tourism spending is at a record level, a key tourism indicator - revenue per available hotel or motel room - still has not quite reached pre-recession levels. But he said he expects that will happen this year.

The news in recent months indicates that the industry is continuing to grow. Last summer's PGA championship on Kiawah Island had an estimated impact of $92 million and brought worldwide publicity for the state.

South Carolina State Parks had record revenues of $21 million last fiscal year, and last fall, Charleston was named the top tourist destination in the world by readers of Conde Nast Traveler magazine.

In addition, the state tourism department this year launched a $2.5 million advertising campaign to attract visitors to what it is calling undiscovered South Carolina.

More than 20,000 people from as far away as Seattle and Santa Fe, N.M., flocked to one of those "undiscovered" places last month: the small tobacco town of Lake City. There, the ArtFields festival featured 400 works of art in public venues and in businesses around town.