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**GOVERNOR GEORGE H. RYAN INVITES TOURISM INDUSTRY
TO JOIN 2002 ILLINOIS GOVERNOR'S CONFERENCE ON TOURISM**
Conference celebrates "Greatest Industry on Earth" in Chicago

Chicago -- Governor George H. Ryan today invited the Illinois tourism industry to attend the state's premier educational forum on tourism, the 15th annual Illinois Governor's Conference on Tourism from March 6-8, 2002 at the Hilton Chicago.

"Tourism plays an essential role in Illinois' economy, directly employing 314,700 Illinoisans and generating more than one billion dollars in tax revenues. This year, we continue our efforts to increase travel and tourism in Illinois by investing in tourism promotion programs," said Governor Ryan. "This conference is an excellent opportunity for participants to hear from the top experts in the tourism industry, share information and plan for the future."

Hosted by the Governor and Visit Illinois, this year's conference, themed "The Greatest Industry on Earth," will celebrate the industry by bringing together hundreds of representatives from the state's hotels, attractions, convention and visitors bureaus, restaurants and destinations.

"In the year 2000, tourism was an integral part of our Illinois economy, sustaining more than 669,000 jobs and providing a 23.6 billion dollar impact to the state," said DCCA Director Pam McDonough. "Despite the growth in 2000, 2001 was a challenging year. I encourage you to join me at this year's conference where we will explore ways to increase tourist traffic to our state and grow Illinois' economy for the future."

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The 2002 conference will feature a variety of top keynote speakers including an address by Travel Industry Association of America President and CEO, William S. Norman. It will also include sessions on the current state of Illinois' tourism industry; a look at tourism and security in today's world; and strategies from hotel and travel-related companies' CEOs. Breakout educational sessions will address topics such as packaging, online marketing and advertising, branding, sports marketing, product development, public relations and international tourism among others. A highlight of the conference will be the annual Governor's Awards Luncheon on March 8, which will honor tourism excellence in Illinois.

"Now, more than ever, it is time to support and grow our industry. The commitment from Governor Ryan and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Bureau of Tourism allows us to continue the conference's commitment to excellence with a top-notch line-up of speakers and sessions," said Visit Illinois Chairman Marc Gordon who is also president and CEO of the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association.

For a complete conference schedule and list of speakers or to register for the 2002 Illinois Governor's Conference on Tourism, visit the Illinois tourism Web site, www.illinoistourism.org or call 800/823-1542 (TTY: 800/419-0667).

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The Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs (DCCA), Bureau of Tourism manages industry efforts that result in sustainable and significant economic and quality of life benefits for Illinois residents.

Visit Illinois is a not-for-profit membership organization that serves as the primary umbrella for the Illinois travel and tourism industry. The group's 29-member board of directors oversees efforts to promote and facilitate increased travel to and within Illinois with core services focusing on legislative support, education and professional development.