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CAFII ALERTS WEEKLY DIGEST: September 24 to October 1, 2021

October 1, 2021

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GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION AND STRATEGY NEWS

Liberal Surtax On Banks, Lifecos Would Have Only Minor Impact On Sector

Analysts Say Companies Would Find Ways To Mitigate The Effects

By Melissa Shin, Investment Executive, September 23, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/research-and-markets/liberal-surtax-on-banks-lifecos-would-have-minor-impact-on-sector/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-morning

The Liberals' promise to implement a 3% corporate surtax on banks and life insurance companies would have only a minimal to slightly negative effect on the financial sector, according to investment strategists.

"My outlook hasn't changed materially. The tax proposal was minor, and corporations will find a way to minimize the impact," said Daniel Gonzalez, a wealth analyst with California-based Javelin Strategy & Research.

"Like the election outcome, our view on the sector is status quo," said Kurt Reiman, chief investment strategist for North America with BlackRock Inc. "The more powerful forces that we should be watching are how the banks emerge from the pandemic."

The Liberals' platform included a pledge to raise the corporate income tax rate for banks and insurance companies from 15% to 18% on all earnings above $1 billion. Those institutions would also contribute to a Canada Dividend Fund.

If the pledge comes to pass, "it would be slightly negative to earnings, and the banks that have more profit would be impacted more," said Scott Chan, managing director of equity research – financials, with Canaccord Genuity Corp. Though he said modelling the effects of any potential legislation is premature, the proposal could have "a few percent [negative] impact to our annual earnings estimates."

Gonzalez estimated the proposal would cost the Big Five banks collectively about $1 billion per year in extra taxes paid, but said the sector at large would find ways to mitigate the damage, such as through reducing costs or by raising fees for customers.

The latter might be easier for banks than insurance companies. "The banks have a more diverse product set than insurers — chequing accounts, savings accounts and mortgages. They have options to blend in [hikes to] those fees if they want to recoup the [tax] cost," Gonzalez said, adding that higher life insurance premiums are less expected by consumers than higher bank fees. "Banks can get away with it a bit easier than insurance companies."

Banks and insurers "have a lot of levers behind the scenes, because of their scale, to offset some of their profitability," Chan said.

Chan questioned the Liberals' choice of sector, however. "It seems odd that they really focused on banks and lifecos, specifically, rather than other sectors that have done well too during the pandemic," he said. "But at the same time, the government has supported the banks and lifecos through a lot of crises."

Reiman said he'll be watching for legislation.

"What we'd be following is, does that legislation arrive in Parliament? And does it arrive by itself, or are there other tax increases that are included in order to gain the necessary votes from other parties to get the legislation over the line?" he said.

As proposed, the corporate surtax would raise $5.3 billion between 2021–22 and 2025–26, according to costing from the Parliamentary Budget Office.

South of the border, Reiman noted that U.S. bank stocks have shrugged off the spectre of corporate tax hikes, at least thus far. "The market has just continually pushed higher," Reiman said, attributing that to cyclical factors and the fact that many bank stocks offer better yields than government bonds.

In general, Reiman said investors have good reason to be bullish on Canadian financials. The banks are "delivering high dividends relative to the broader market, and [there's] potential for those dividends to increase, and for the loan loss provisions to be supportive to earnings because of the economic restart."

And while he warned that dividend yield isn't the be-all and end-all, he said dividends are a good indicator in the current environment.

"When there's powerful economic forces and companies are growing their earnings consistently, and you're in an environment of generally reduced default risk — to say nothing of the supportive fiscal and monetary policies — that's when the dividend yield can be looked at as a more favourable signal for which companies to own," Reiman said.

Selected Net Incomes For Fiscal Year 2020

All years ended October 31 unless otherwise indicated.

- Toronto-Dominion Bank: $11.6 billion
- Royal Bank of Canada: $11.4 billion
- Bank of Nova Scotia: $6.9 billion
- Bank of Montreal: $5.1 billion
- Manulife Financial Corp. (December 31): $5.7 billion
- CIBC: $3.8 billion
- Sun Life Financial Inc.: $2.4 billion
- National Bank of Canada: $2.1 billion
- iA Financial Corporation Inc. (December 31): $611 million
- Canadian Western Bank: $272 million
- Laurentian Bank of Canada: $114 million

REGULATOR/POLICY-MAKER NEWS

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OSFI Planning For More Volatility In Financial Sector

Climate Change And Digitization Are The Two Biggest Risks, The Superintendent Of Financial Institutions Said

By Ian Bickis, Canadian Press, September 29, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/industry-news/banking-regulator-planning-for-more-volatility-in-financial-sector/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN

The head of Canada's banking regulator warned on Wednesday, September 29 of the potential for increased volatility in the global financial system as risks, especially around climate change and digital finances, are on the rise.

"My new responsibility requires that I assume and plan for more frequent volatility storms," said Peter Routledge in his first speech since he took on the role of Superintendent of Financial Institutions in June.

He said climate change will hit the cash flow generated by some assets and trigger "noticeable changes in valuation," while cyber attacks are on the rise as finances become increasingly digital.

'Climate change and digitalization represent the known unknowns in OSFI's risk environment. As Superintendent, I must make plans on the assumption that other macro sources of volatility will emerge from unknown places," he said.

Speaking virtually at the Global Risk Institute Annual Summit, he said the risk environment demands a transformation of the regulator's approach and organization to meet the "extraordinary opportunities and challenges" ahead.

On climate change, Routledge said OSFI has an obligation to ensure Canada's financial sector and federally regulated pension plans are ready to manage the risks that will come as the economy shifts to net zero by 2050.

The regulator is working with the Bank of Canada and the private sector to better understand the risks that the transition will bring, and is also consulting widely on how to identify, measure, and respond to climate-related risks, with more requirements coming, he said.

"Climate risk disclosures and climate risk management by Canadian federally regulated financial institutions will expand materially over my term as Superintendent."

On the increasingly digital financial sector, Routledge said the regulator will look to balance innovation and stability.

He said the regulator is looking to ease entry of new business models into the regulated space, while also trying to better understand the third-party risks created by some of the new models.

The comments come as the Canadian government is looking at how to move forward on open banking, which would allow the secure sharing of personal banking data with third parties such as financial technology companies.

An advisory committee report released by the Ministry of Finance in August recommended having some level of data-sharing system in place by 2023.

Routledge said the regulator is also looking to increase disclosures around cyber risk, and that it is still working to understand how to respond to cryptocurrencies.

To meet the challenges ahead, Routledge said he will focus the regulator's transformation on culture, including more emphasis on psychological safety and diversity, and on improved data and an updated supervisory framework.

New SRO, Total Cost Reporting On Tap For 2022, Morisset Says

The CSA Chair Provided Details About The New SRO And Why He's "All In" On CRM3

By James Langton, Investment Executive, September 29, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/from-the-regulators/new-sro-total-cost-reporting-on-tap-for-2022-morisset-says/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN

The Canadian Securities Administrators (CSA) are hoping to have a new industry self-regulatory organization up and running in the second half of next year, according to Louis Morisset, chair of the CSA and president and CEO of the Autorité des marchés financiers.

Speaking at the Investment Funds Institute of Canada's virtual annual conference, Morisset said that the regulators, which are currently consulting on proposed Self-Regulatory Organization (SRO) reform, are hoping to go live with the new organization that combines the Investment Industry Regulatory Organization of Canada and the Mutual Fund Dealers Association of Canada in the second half of 2022.

More detail on the CSA's precise timeline for launching the SRO and its implementation plans will come later this fall, Morisset said.

In the meantime, he reported that the regulators have struck a couple of committees: an executive committee headed by Stan Magidson, chair and CEO of the Alberta Securities Commission, and an operational committee that is jointly chaired by representatives from the Ontario Securities Commission and the British Columbia Securities Commission.

To start, the executive committee is focused on identifying the appropriate corporate structure and governance arrangements for the new SRO, while the operational committee is taking the lead on harmonizing rules, compliance and enforcement processes, and eventually on developing a fee model.

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Those committees, and various subcommittees, will be engaging with the industry and investor advocates alike to seek input on the SRO reform project, Morisset said.

In particular, he stressed that smaller, independent fund dealers that are concerned about their status under a new, much larger SRO will have a voice in the process and a place in the new regime.

At the same time, Morisset announced that the CSA will soon — possibly as early as next week — be releasing proposals for reducing regulatory burdens in the investment fund sector. This may include measures such as consolidating certain disclosure requirements, curbing inefficiencies, and easing delivery obligations.

And he said the next phase of reforms is also in the works, which could include measures such as an "access equals delivery" model for fund filings and a new shelf prospectus model in the fund sector.

Looking further out, in the first half of 2022, the industry should also get its first look at total cost reporting proposals (CRM3) that aim to harmonize and enhance cost disclosure for both mutual funds and segregated funds, Morisset said.

"This a very active project, and the CSA is all in," he said.

As for the industry's response so far to the client-focused reforms — in particular, the decision of several bank-owned dealers to stop selling third-party funds in their branches — Morisset said that was not the regulators' intention and the CSA is working to address those kinds of unintended negative consequences.

DIVERSITY/INCLUSION/FIGHTING SYSTEMIC RACISM NEWS

Gender Diversity A Work In Progress At Banks

Larger Banks More Diverse, Research Finds, But Link To Rating Performance Unclear

By James Langton, Investment Executive, September 23, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/research-and-markets/gender-diversity-a-work-in-progress-at-banks/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-morning

A review of U.S. and Canadian banks by Moody's Investors Service finds that more diverse firms tend to have higher credit ratings, but stops short of concluding that there's a direct link.

The rating agency examined the boards of directors and workforces of 72 North American banks, and uncovered a "slight positive correlation" between greater gender diversity and the firms' credit ratings.

On average, women made up 28% of the boards at higher-rated banks, compared with 26% at lower-ranking institutions, Moody's reported.

However, Moody's cautioned that the results are ultimately inconclusive, given the relatively small sample of highly rated banks in the review.

"Any correlation is strongest at the highest rating levels, and not present down the rating scale," the review said.

Moody's also stressed that "correlation is not causation," and that the overwhelming majority of corporate directors are men. While women make up over half of the banks' entry-level workforce (56%), this "does not yet translate evenly to the executive level," where 38% are female, or the board level. "Effective support of women's career progression remains a key challenge."

The study did find that larger banks tend to have greater gender diversity.

"These banks also have more diversified business models and a larger international presence, which may enhance their ability to prioritize and benefit from wider gender diversity," Moody's said.

While the study didn't establish a concrete link between diversity and rating performance, "the data provides a baseline to examine whether these metrics will continue to improve in tandem with greater gender diversity."

Reconciliation-Focused Investment Products Could Be Coming

Indigenous Businesses Represent A Huge Untapped Investment Opportunity, Experts Say

By Melissa Shin, Investment Executive, August 24, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/products/reconciliation-focused-products-could-be-coming/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-All-afternoon

Prominent voices in the Indigenous business community are hopeful that reconciliation-focused investment products could soon be available for retail investors.

"Part of our desired future state [is] to bring forward an exchange-traded fund of PAR-certified companies," said Paul Lacerte, managing partner with Raven Indigenous Capital Partners, which runs the Raven Indigenous Impact Capital Fund.

The PAR or Progressive Aboriginal Relations certification program, which is run by the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB), has certified more than 150 companies since it began in 2001. The PAR

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program verifies outcomes in the areas of leadership actions, employment, business development, and community relationships.

Lacerte spoke during a panel discussion hosted by the Responsible Investment Association last week.

Panellist Tabatha Bull, president and CEO of CCAB, said she's had encouraging conversations with representatives from TMX Group Inc., which submitted a PAR application to CCAB earlier this year.

"My dream is that we could see the PAR certification [status for] every organization on the stock exchange listing, and that as an investor I can know that [a] company has gone through [the PAR] process: they've been certified, they are doing good work," Bull said. "[They] said that's not going to be that hard."

Bull added that there have been discussions about establishing reconciliation-focused and Indigenous-relations mutual funds.

In a written statement, a TMX Group spokesperson reiterated the company's commitment to PAR. "While discussions of specific products are still in the preliminary stages, TMX's commitment to this important work is long-term and we are excited to explore new ways to provide Indigenous businesses with efficient access to growth opportunities," the spokesperson said.

The Raven Indigenous Impact Capital Fund in January raised $25 million from 38 investors across Canada and the United States. Lacerte said Indigenous businesses represent a huge untapped investment opportunity.

"It's critical to shift the lens from one of benevolence to an asset lens — to recognize the incredible richness of Indigenous epistemology and worldview, and the underlying values that drive decision-making within Indigenous communities," he said.

"Indigenous epistemology is really representative of the solution for so many of [today's] social, environmental, and economic challenges we're facing as a society."

Bull agreed, saying that Indigenous businesses and communities want to build ventures that last, be they their own projects or those executed with a partner.

"They're in it for the long haul," she said. "They are there to be with that project for the next 100 years."

Bull gave an example from earlier this year, when a coalition of Mi'kmaq First Nations partnered with Premium Brands Holdings Corp. to purchase Clearwater Seafoods Inc. The Mi'kmaq now own 50% of Clearwater.

"The communities that are part of that project have no plans to exit. They actually want to become whole owners of Clearwater," she said. "It's a long-term strategy when you're partnering with Indigenous communities, which for investors, is a really important piece of what you're looking for."

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Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action 92 defined reconciliation for corporate Canada by asking it to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Doing so would involve actions such as ensuring equitable job access for Indigenous peoples and educating staff on Indigenous rights.

CAFII MEMBER AND/OR PARENT COMPANY-SPECIFIC NEWS

CIBC Hires Ex-Liberal Minister To Be Vice-Chair For Global Investing

New Recruit's Experience Will 'Enhance The Perspective And Advice We Can Offer', Says Bank Executive

By Bloomberg News, September 27, 2021

https://www.wealthprofessional.ca/business-news/big-bank-hires-ex-liberal-minister-to-be-vice-chair-for-global-investing/360186?utm_source=GA&utm_medium=20210927&utm_campaign=WPCW-Breaking-20210927&utm_content=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8&tu=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8

Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce has hired Navdeep Bains, formerly the country's minister for innovation, science and industry, as a vice-chair for global investment banking.

Bains joins the bank on October 4, Toronto-based CIBC said in a statement on Monday, September 27. Bains, 44, served as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's industry minister from 2015 until the start of this year, when he announced he was stepping down to spend more time with his family after almost 17 years in politics.

Bains was first elected in a key Toronto suburb in 2004 and represented it until 2011, when the Liberals suffered their worst-ever electoral defeat. He won the district back in 2015, when Trudeau took the party from third place to power, and became Trudeau's lead minister on issues such as telecommunications and foreign takeovers, including the 2018 decision to block a Chinese bid for construction giant Aecon Group Inc.

"Our clients in the innovation and technology sectors are seeking to expand their opportunities in a rapidly changing environment, and Navdeep's experience will enhance the perspective and advice we can offer," Roman Dubczak, CIBC's head of global investment banking, said in the statement.

Bains will join former Conservative Party lawmaker Lisa Raitt in CIBC's investment banking operations. The bank hired Raitt, who served in the cabinet of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in January 2020 after she was defeated in an election the previous year.

Before entering politics, Bains started his career as a financial analyst, CIBC said.

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Financial Consumer Agency Of Canada Fines TD Bank Over Account Fee Disclosure Failure

The Bank Was Fined $400,000 After It Overcharged Seniors $31 Million

By James Langton, Investment Executive, September 30, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/from-the-regulators/td-fined-over-account-fee-disclosure-failure/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-All-afternoon

Toronto-Dominion Bank (TD) has been fined $400,000 by the federal banking watchdog, the Financial Consumer Agency of Canada (FCAC), which found that the bank had failed to properly disclose account fees over several years, resulting in senior clients paying millions in excess fees.

The FCAC fined TD after concluding that the firm violated provisions of federal banking legislation that require the disclosure of deposit account fees.

Specifically, FCAC staff alleged that disclosure-related violations occurred between 2012 and 2018, after the bank discontinued its free account plan for seniors but didn't properly disclose how senior customers could access a new "senior's rebate" offered instead. As a result, some eligible customers weren't automatically charged the lower account rate for seniors.

In total, the issue affected approximately 500,000 customers over six years, resulting in excess charges of approximately $31 million, according to the decision from FCAC commissioner Judith Robertson.

The bank voluntarily reimbursed clients once the issue was discovered, and it self-reported the violation to the FCAC in 2018.

According to the regulator's decision, while the bank accepted that the alleged violation occurred, it questioned the penalty proposed by the regulator's staff, and it argued that it should not be publicly identified in connection with the enforcement action.

"TD submits that this non-compliance with the disclosure requirements was the result of a difference in interpretation made in good faith rather than indicating negligence or intent," the decision said, noting that the bank asked for the proposed penalty to be half the amount requested by FCAC staff.

However, the FCAC concluded that, while the bank didn't intend to mislead its customers or intentionally charge them more than necessary, the bank was negligent in that the issue was ultimately uncovered through a client complaint rather than through the bank's own oversight processes.

"This, and the lack of the identification of a potential breach of the disclosure requirements for the period from 2012 to 2017, are an indication of a degree of negligence on the part of TD in fulfilling its regulatory obligations," the decision said.

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"It is regrettable that TD did not respond differently when it had evidence that the disclosure document was not effective as early as 2013. The lack of take-up of the reduced charges by eligible seniors was a signal that something was not working as expected," the FCAC noted. "A proper examination of this unintended outcome could have surfaced the non-compliant disclosure and triggered a more effective response on the part of the bank."

Ultimately, the FCAC upheld the penalty sought by its staff, citing "the length of time this issue was outstanding, the number of customers affected, the dollar amounts involved, the degree of negligence identified above, and [TD's] violation history," which was deemed an aggravating factor in the case.

It also decided to publicly name the bank, calling the step "an appropriate measure and a suitable specific deterrent."

"Although TD's affected customers have already been informed and received reimbursement, they have not been made aware that this was as a result of a regulatory compliance issue," it said.

"Publication is therefore consistent with FCAC's purpose to protect and educate consumers and to promote compliance by banks."

Sun Life Is More Than Just An Insurance Business, Says New CEO

By Susan Yellin, Insurance Portal, September 24, 2021

Both Sun Life and its clients need to reposition their views of the company as not just an insurance business, but also an investment management company that delivers on many fronts, says the company's new president and CEO. "That concept of 50-50 is a good place to land because insurance can benefit from asset management and asset management can benefit from insurance and we can drive better returns for both parts of the organization," Kevin Strain told the recent virtual Scotiabank Financials Summit on September 9. Strain said his predecessor, Dean Connor, left a legacy that he would like to build on to help positively change the view some have of Sun Life. He said Connor, who retired on August 6, was very deliberate in how Sun Life wanted to allocate its capital and take advantage of mega-trends such as the emergence of the middle class in Asia, the importance of the alternative asset space, the increase of health insurance in the U.S., as well as shifting its business to less risk, more capital and more fees. He also ensured that the focus was no longer on "customers," but rather on "clients." On top of that, Connor concentrated on people, and execution and delivery of services, said Strain. Now, Strain said it's important for the company to make the insurance-asset management connection to deal with issues such as long-term liabilities and growth in the alternative asset management space. The company has seen growth in many areas, including life insurance sales in Asia and Canada and the U.S. benefit business. Sun Life has also invested heavily in digital tools, particularly its tech stack, determining how its information technology and the rest of its businesses can operate more closely, as well as giving clients the experience they expect. Maintaining these three buckets will go far in adding to the company's sustainability as well as understanding clients by getting more feedback from them on how they make their decisions, said Strain.

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Read Story (Subscription Required): https://insurance-portal.ca/life/sun-life-is-more-than-just-an-insurance-business-says-new-ceo/?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=daily_complete_202109-24&utm_medium=email

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Sun Life Appoints First Senior Vice-President Of Sustainability

By Daniel Samson-Legault, Insurance Portal, September 20, 2021

https://portail-assurance.ca/economie/premiere-directrice-de-la-durabilite-chez-sun-life/?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=weekly_summary_202109-24&utm_medium=email

Sun Life has appointed Alanna Boyd as its first Senior Vice President and Senior Director of Sustainability.

Ms. Boyd will report to Kevin Strain, who on August 9 became the 11th president and CEO of the company. In her new role, Ms. Boyd will develop and pursue Sun Life's long-term economic, environmental, and social commitments to enhance its sustainability performance.

“Appointing a senior sustainability director who will be dedicated to advancing our priorities is important to me,” said Mr. Strain.

Ms. Boyd joined Sun Life in 2016. She was most recently Vice-President, Government Affairs, Regulation and Sustainability. She oversaw the development and execution of Sun Life's sustainability strategy and communication of progress in that area. In 2019, she led the development of a new Sun Life sustainability plan.

In recent years, Sun Life says it has taken several steps to achieve measurable results in areas where it can have a positive impact on society and the environment, including:

- Increase financial security
- Encourage a healthy lifestyle
- Advance sustainable investing
- Be a reliable and responsible company

“The world is facing unprecedented challenges. Climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing inequalities. Sun Life has the responsibility and the opportunity to expand its sustainability agenda to create a resilient, sustainable and inclusive economy,” said Ms. Boyd. "A lot of work awaits us, especially to achieve the UN's sustainable development goals by 2030."

During her career, Ms. Boyd has held leadership positions in the private and public sectors and has served as a policy advisor at the federal and provincial levels. She also has over 10 years of experience in sustainability in the private sector.

Ms. Boyd sits on the board of the Association of Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR), which supports the efforts of Canadian companies which want to have a positive impact on society. She also sits on the boards of Toronto Finance International (TFI) and the Public Affairs Council (PAC).

Sun Life To Combine Group Benefits And Online Health Service Units For Technology Integration Benefits

By Kevin Orland, Bloomberg News, September 29, 2021

https://www.insurancebusinessmag.com/ca/business-news/sun-life-to-combine-units-311677.aspx?utm_source=GA&utm_medium=20210929&utm_campaign=IBCW-Breaking-2-20210929&utm_content=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8&tu=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8

Sun Life Financial Inc. is combining its group benefits and Lumino online health service into a new business unit called Sun Life Health in a bid to more tightly integrate technology into its offerings.

Dave Jones, previously senior vice-president for group benefits, has assumed the new role of president of Sun Life Health, the Toronto-based insurer said on Wednesday, September 29. Sun Life Health is part of the insurer's broader Canadian operations.

The combination is geared toward improving service and speeding innovation for the group benefits business's more than 3.4 million employee and dependent customers, and bolstering the offerings of the Lumino Health provider search and virtual-care platform.

"Canadians are looking for innovative digital and customized health solutions that are tailored to them," Jones said in an interview. "We're definitely making the bet that those are an important part of the landscape for the future."

Sun Life will look to continue building the business, Jones said. While some of its capabilities are "portable," the ability to expand to other regions may be restrained by differences in countries' health care systems, he said. Sun Life is also still deciding what role acquisitions might play in the unit's future, he indicated.

"We definitely want to build internally, and go from there if opportunities present themselves," Jones said.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE, RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY NEWS

What Canadians Can Expect From COVID-19 This Fall And Winter

Colder Weather Means More Time Indoors And The Potential For Increased Viral Transmission

By Mark Gollom, CBC News, September 29, 2021

https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/COVID-19-fall-winter-forecast-1.6185069

With the beginning of fall and a more transmissible strain of the coronavirus than last year's taking hold, Canadians may wonder about the outlook of the pandemic over the next few months.

Some epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists are expressing cautious optimism, hoping that greater immunity levels just may be able to contain the delta variant that causes COVID-19, and that many jurisdictions could see hospitalization rates coming down.

"I'm always optimistic, and here's why," said epidemiologist Raywat Deonandan, an associate professor at the University of Ottawa. "Pandemics have a beginning, middle, and end. And where are we right now? Locally, I think we're near the end."

Others, however, such as B.C. epidemiologist Caroline Colijn, suspect Canada is still heading into a "challenging fall" despite considerable progress, particularly with vaccinations.

"The delta variant is much more infectious than the COVID-19 that we had around last fall and even last spring," she said.

As well, provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan are currently in crisis mode, as a spike in COVID-19 hospitalizations among the unvaccinated has overloaded their health-care systems.

"I have no idea how long the crisis will last," said Craig Jenne, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Calgary. "We may see the flattening of the curve in the coming days, but the real question is, when does that curve start to decline?"

Colder weather means people spending more time indoors, and the potential for an increase of viral transmission. Meanwhile, another delta surge or a new variant could emerge that drastically changes the outlook, some experts say.

Here is a look at the factors at play.

Where We Are Now

By many measures, the country is in a much stronger position facing COVID-19 than it was this time last year.

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Last fall, Canadians were still without vaccines, which wouldn't be approved until December, when Health Canada gave the green light to Pfizer-BioNTech and, weeks later, Moderna. Approval for Astra-Zeneca would follow a couple of months later.

Now, according to the CBC's vaccine tracker, Canada has reached 70 per cent of its total population with one dose and 80 per cent of its eligible population with two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine.

"Look how far we have come," Deonandan said. "We have extraordinary vaccines at supply levels that all of us here in the rich world can access.... We have a rapid test. We know so much about this disease. We have all the tools needed to control this."

All the accumulated knowledge about the virus over the past year and a half makes it slightly less unpredictable, Jenne said.

"We know what works to slow it. We know who's at risk of hospitalization. We know the impact of our public health measures."

Yet, even though there are successful vaccines and successful vaccination programs, the infectiousness of the virus means they are not quite successful enough, Colijn said.

"It's so infectious that you really need almost everybody to be immunized," she said. "So where does that leave us for the outlook? What may happen is that most people who are not vaccinated will get COVID-19."

Hospitalizations, Waning Immunity And The Delta Variant

Deonandan said he expects greater immunity levels will result in a drop in the hospitalization rate — the proportion of infected people who become hospitalized.

Dr. Christopher Labos, a Montreal cardiologist with a degree in epidemiology, also offered hope that where vaccination rates are higher, and where most restrictions — mask wearing and vaccine passports — are in place, it's going to be possible to contain the delta variant.

"And, at the very least, even if we do see cases, maybe we won't see as many people ending up in hospital," he said.

One of the big unknowns, however, is the potential waning of immunity over time. Though Deonandan said he expects the ability of vaccines to protect against initial infection will gradually weaken, he predicts their protection against hospitalization and death "will remain extraordinarily good."

Based on when most Canadians received their shots, waning immunity could start to be an issue around late October, said Dr. Andrew Morris, an infectious diseases specialist at Toronto's Sinai Health and University Health Network.

And the question, he said, is whether provinces will anticipate this and offer people booster shots to try to head off the potential problem.

"If all the governments in Canada say they're going to wait to boost until we sort of see the vaccines aren't working any longer, it could kind of be a little bit too late," he said.

However, some health officials suggest another possibility — that the delta variant may have peaked. That's the analysis of the U.S.-based COVID-19 Scenario Modelling Hub, which consists of a team of professors from across the country who provide projections about the virus.

Its modelling predicts a steady decline in COVID-19 cases in the U.S., with no significant winter surge, NPR reported.

Justin Lessler, a professor in the department of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina who helps run the hub, told NPR that while there is wide-ranging uncertainty in the models, deaths could drop to 100 a day by March. That, he said, is dependant upon children getting vaccinated and that a more contagious variant doesn't emerge.

Deonandan said it's certainly possible that some parts of the world, such as the U.K. and some U.S. states, have seen the peak of the delta wave.

"I anticipate that the northern hemisphere should see a decline in the delta wave by the end of this year," he said.

But both Deonandan and the COVID-19 Scenario Modelling Hub also offered a somewhat grim prediction — that a decline in infection rates would be due in part to the fast-spreading delta variant just running out of people to infect.

With so many delta infections among people who are unvaccinated, those who survive might have sufficient immunity, which "starts us on that herd immunity conversation again," Deonandan said.

"A combination of sufficient coverage plus unbelievably high vaccination uptake, which we are experiencing in Canada, might mean by January we will see no more waves," he said.

New Variants?

Having said that, variants will likely continue to emerge, but whether any will become a dominant strain remains to be seen, Labos said. Much will depend on how vaccination efforts ramp up around the world.

"New variants emerge because the virus keeps spreading," he said. "It keeps copying itself. It keeps mutating. And so the more chances you give it to copy itself, the more chances you give it to have a mutation that can turn it into a different strain that's more aggressive."

Deonandan said he is a "tad concerned" that a new variant could emerge that changes factors such as the transmissibility of the virus, the profile of symptoms, and the ability to detect the virus.

But he also pointed out that the COVID-19 vaccines have proven effective against all the coronavirus variants that have emerged so far.

"Therefore, there's no reason to expect any new variants not to be at least a little bit preventable by our vaccines, and probably preventable by a high amount," he said. "So I'm not overly concerned about it."

Morris views things a bit differently.

"I know that there are some experts who feel that the likelihood of a more virulent strain that's vaccine resistant is extremely unlikely to happen. But, you know, I'm willing to wait and see."

A Daily Pill To Treat COVID-19 Could Be Just Months Away, Scientists Say

By JoNel Aleccia, Kaiser Health News, September 24, 2021

https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/a-daily-pill-to-treat-COVID-19-could-be-just-months-away-scientists-say

Within a day of testing positive for COVID-19 in June, Miranda Kelly was sick enough to be scared. At 44, with diabetes and high blood pressure, Kelly, a certified nursing assistant, was having trouble breathing, symptoms serious enough to send her to the emergency room.

When her husband, Joe, 46, fell ill with the virus, too, she really got worried, especially about their five teenagers at home: "I thought, 'I hope to God we don't wind up on ventilators. We have children. Who's going to raise these kids?"

But the Kellys, who live in Seattle, had agreed just after their diagnoses to join a clinical trial at the nearby Fred Hutch cancer research center that's part of an international effort to test an antiviral treatment that could halt COVID-19 early in its course.

By the next day, the couple were taking four pills, twice a day. Though they weren't told whether they had received an active medication or placebo, within a week, they said, their symptoms were better. Within two weeks, they had recovered.

"I don't know if we got the treatment, but I kind of feel like we did," Miranda Kelly said. "To have all these underlying conditions, I felt like the recovery was very quick."

The Kellys have a role in developing what could be the world's next chance to thwart COVID-19: a short-term regimen of daily pills that can fight the virus early after diagnosis and conceivably prevent symptoms from developing after exposure.

"Oral antivirals have the potential to not only curtail the duration of one's COVID-19 syndrome, but also have the potential to limit transmission to people in your household if you are sick," said Timothy Sheahan, a virologist at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill who has helped pioneer these therapies.

Antivirals are already essential treatments for other viral infections, including hepatitis C and HIV. One of the best known is Tamiflu, the widely prescribed pill that can shorten the duration of influenza and reduce the risk of hospitalization if given quickly.

The medications, developed to treat and prevent viral infections in people and animals, work differently depending on the type. But they can be engineered to boost the immune system to fight infection, block receptors so viruses can't enter healthy cells, or lower the amount of active virus in the body.

At least three promising antivirals for COVID-19 are being tested in clinical trials, with results expected as soon as late fall or winter, said Carl Dieffenbach, director of the Division of AIDS at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who is overseeing antiviral development.

"I think that we will have answers as to what these pills are capable of within the next several months," Dieffenbach said.

The top contender is a medication from Merck & Co. and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics called molnupiravir, Dieffenbach said. This is the product being tested in the Kellys' Seattle trial. Two others include a candidate from Pfizer, known as PF-07321332, and AT-527, an antiviral produced by Roche and Atea Pharmaceuticals.

They work by interfering with the virus's ability to replicate in human cells. In the case of molnupiravir, the enzyme that copies the viral genetic material is forced to make so many mistakes that the virus can't reproduce. That, in turn, reduces the patient's viral load, shortening infection time and preventing the kind of dangerous immune response that can cause serious illness or death.

So far, only one antiviral drug, remdesivir, has been approved to treat COVID-19. But it is given intravenously to patients ill enough to be hospitalized, and is not intended for early, widespread use. By contrast, the top contenders under study can be packaged as pills.

Sheahan, who also performed pre-clinical work on remdesivir, led an early study in mice that showed that molnupiravir could prevent early disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The formula was discovered at Emory University and later acquired by Ridgeback and Merck.

Clinical trials have followed, including an early trial of 202 participants last spring that showed that molnupiravir rapidly reduced the levels of infectious virus. Merck chief executive Robert Davis said this month that the company expects data from its larger phase 3 trials in the coming weeks, with the potential to seek emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration "before year-end."

Pfizer launched a combined phase 2 and 3 trial of its product on September 1, and Atea officials said they expect results from phase 2 and phase 3 trials later this year.

If the results are positive and emergency use is granted for any product, Dieffenbach said, "distribution could begin quickly."

That would mean millions of Americans soon could have access to a daily orally administered medication, ideally a single pill, that could be taken for five to 10 days at the first confirmation of COVID-19 infection.

"When we get there, that's the idea," said Dr. Daniel Griffin, an infectious diseases and immunology expert at Columbia University. "To have this all around the country, so that people get it the same day they get diagnosed."

Once sidelined for lack of interest, oral antivirals to treat coronavirus infections are now a subject of fierce competition and funding. In June, the Biden administration announced it had agreed to obtain about 1.7 million treatment courses of Merck's molnupiravir, at a cost of $1.2 billion, if the product receives emergency authorization or full approval. The same month, the administration said it would invest $3.2 billion in the Antiviral Program for Pandemics, which aims to develop antivirals for the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, Dieffenbach said.

The pandemic kick-started a long-neglected effort to develop potent antiviral treatments for coronaviruses, said Sheahan. Though the original SARS virus in 2003 gave scientists a scare — followed by Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS, in 2012 — research efforts slowed when those outbreaks did not persist.

"The commercial drive to develop any products just went down the tubes," said Sheahan.

Widely available antiviral drugs would join the monoclonal antibody therapies already used to treat and prevent serious illness and hospitalizations caused by COVID-19. The lab-produced monoclonal antibodies, which mimic the body's natural response to infection, were easier to develop but must be given primarily through intravenous infusions.

The federal government is covering the cost of most monoclonal products at $2,000 a dose. It's still too early to know how the price of antivirals might compare.

Like the monoclonal antibodies, antiviral pills would be no substitute for vaccination, said Griffin. They would be another tool to fight COVID-19. "It's nice to have another option," he said.

One challenge in developing antiviral drugs quickly has been recruiting enough participants for the clinical trials, each of which needs to enroll many hundreds of people, said Dr. Elizabeth Duke, a Fred Hutch research associate overseeing its molnupiravir trial.

Participants must be unvaccinated and enrolled in the trial within five days of a positive COVID-19 test. Any given day, interns make 100 calls to newly COVID-19-positive people in the Seattle area — and most say no.

"Just generally speaking, there's a lot of mistrust about the scientific process," Duke said. "And some of the people are saying kind of nasty things to the interns."

If the antiviral pills prove effective, the next challenge will be ramping up a distribution system that can rush them to people as soon as they test positive. Griffin said it will take something akin to the program set up last year by UnitedHealthcare, which sped Tamiflu kits to 200,000 at-risk patients enrolled in the insurer's Medicare Advantage plans.

Merck officials predicted the company could produce more than 10 million courses of therapy by the end of the year. Atea and Pfizer have not released similar estimates.

Even more promising? Studies evaluating whether antivirals can prevent infection after exposure.

"Think about that," said Duke, who is also overseeing a prophylactic trial. "You could give it to everyone in a household, or everyone in a school. Then we're talking about a return to, maybe, normal life."

United States Ends Travel Bans, Requires Vaccination

By Ben Schlappig, One Mile At A Time, September 29, 2021

https://onemileatatime.com/news/united-states-ends-travel-bans-requires-vaccination/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=today_on_omaat&utm_term=2021-09-29

Recently, the Biden administration revealed that the United States will finally be ending its nonsensical travel bans, replacing them with a new vaccination requirement for foreign visitors. Furthermore, unvaccinated Americans who are traveling internationally will be required to undergo more testing.

There were a lot of questions remaining regarding the United States' policy, including what kind of vaccines the United States would accept for entry. We now have some more information on that front, so let's go over all the details.

United States Will End Blanket Travel Bans

The United States' current travel bans will be coming to an end as of early November 2021, and will be replaced by a system that requires visitors to be vaccinated.

For context, dating back as far as the spring of 2020, the United States has had a variety of travel bans in place during the pandemic, preventing non-Americans from entering the country if they've been in certain foreign countries in the past 14 days. We've seen bans against Brazil, China, India, the Schengen Zone, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, among other countries. These blanket bans will be no more starting in a few weeks.

There had been reports several weeks back of the United States working on a new system for allowing in foreigners, based on vaccination status rather than what countries they've been in. Unfortunately, this has been rolled out at a ridiculously slow pace, though I guess better late than never.

United States Will Require Visitors To Be Vaccinated

Replacing the current travel bans, the United States will instead require visitors to be vaccinated. The policy is expected to take effect as of early November 2021, though we don't have an exact date yet. As before, all travelers will need to provide a negative coronavirus test result, taken within three days of travel to the United States. There will be no need to quarantine on arrival.

It's expected that children will be exempt from this policy, but it's not known yet what the cut-off age is for that, and if children will just need a standard coronavirus test, or what.

Which Vaccines Will The United States Accept?

There had been questions surrounding what vaccines would be eligible for entry into the United States. There's an update on that front, as the United States will recognize any vaccines authorized by the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) or World Health Organization (WHO). That includes the following vaccines:

- AstraZeneca
- Johnson & Johnson
- Moderna
- Pfizer-BioNTech
- Sinopharm
- Sinovac

Ultimately, I'd say this is good news, because it could have been a lot worse if the United States only accepted FDA approved vaccines, and not WHO approved ones. However, it is worth acknowledging that this will shut out some people, including those who had Russia's Sputnik vaccine, as well as those who had India's Covaxin vaccine.

Unvaccinated Americans Will Have To Double Test

There are also some changes with travel rules for unvaccinated Americans. Currently, Americans can always enter the United States as long as they've had a coronavirus test within three days of return travel to the country. That will be changing. Unvaccinated Americans:

- Will need to test within a day of returning to the United States, rather than within three days
- Will need to test again after returning to the United States

The exact details of these new requirements remain to be seen, especially surrounding the testing on arrival. Presumably, this wouldn't happen at the airport, but rather people would have some amount of time to get tested on their own (whether or not that's using the honor system remains to be seen).

This creates a big incentive for international travelers from the United States to get vaccinated.

This Should Have Happened A Long Time Ago

Frankly, I've been disappointed by President Biden's lack of actions on these travel bans. Biden always promised he'd "follow the science," and there's simply no denying that these outdated travel bans that do nothing to account for actual risk haven't in any way followed the science.

The restrictions haven't been based on the epidemiological situation in a country, but rather have been based on identifying places that had a bad outbreak at one point, but then the bans were never revisited.

Determining eligibility to enter the United States based on vaccination status makes a lot more sense. Being vaccinated significantly reduces your risk of hospitalization and death, and it's also believed to reduce your risk of getting coronavirus. Wanting people to be vaccinated makes a lot more sense than a blanket ban based on where someone is coming from.

I think it's also important to recognize that travel bans go way beyond tourism. You have all kinds of important things that have been lost due to these bans — you have people in long distance relationships, babies have been born, people have died, etc.

Bottom Line

The United States is changing its travel restrictions, eliminating the current blanket travel bans that are in place. Instead, the United States will welcome vaccinated travelers from around the world as of early November 2021. The United States will recognize any FDA or WHO approved vaccines for these purposes. Furthermore, unvaccinated Americans will need to double test when returning to the United States, including getting a test within a day of travel.

It's fantastic to see these travel bans finally ending. This is oh-so-overdue.

Will Canadians With Mixed-Vaccine Doses Be Blocked From U.S. Flights?

Opinion By Ashley Nunes, Research Fellow At Harvard Law School, Special To The Globe and Mail, September 30, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-will-canadians-with-mixed-vaccine-doses-be-blocked-from-us-flights/

Many Canadians hoping to visit the U.S. have been nervously eyeing incoming American travel regulations. Starting in November, the Biden administration will require that anyone flying into the U.S be fully vaccinated. Those who don't comply will be refused entry.

At first glance, the move, which is aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 locally, shouldn't irk Canadians. We have a higher vaccination rate than Americans, and the Canadian government is also set to bring in rules requiring air travellers here to be vaccinated.

However, the U.S. has yet to approve the mixing of COVID-19 vaccines, meaning large numbers of Canadians who had two different shots might not be considered vaccinated south of the border.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – the U.S. premier public health agency – says that coronavirus vaccines are "not interchangeable." According to the agency, "if you received a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, you should get the same product for your second shot." Not doing so purportedly risks being considered – in the eyes of U.S. regulators at least – not fully vaccinated.

In Canada, millions were given the green light to combine shots. The National Advisory Committee on Immunization – which advises the Canadian government – noted that vaccines can be "considered interchangeable and should be offered to complete the vaccine series." More than 3.8 million Canadians opted to mix and match vaccines – for good measure, even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau got in on the action.

Should these Canadians worry about heading south of the border? I doubt it. Here's why.

Current U.S. vaccine policy favours – rather than mandates – double jabs from the same manufacturer. Indeed, a close look at the CDC's own website shows that individuals receiving two doses from different vaccine manufacturers can in fact be considered fully vaccinated. There are caveats, the most notable being that your doses must be mRNA vaccine products (Pfizer-BioNTech's Comirnaty and Moderna's Spikevax). But mixing mRNA and non-mRNA vaccines (for example, AstraZeneca's Vaxzevria) isn't clearly prohibited. The CDC says "every effort should be made to determine which vaccine product was received as the first dose to ensure completion of the vaccine series with the same product." Assuming you expend this effort and still come up short, nothing explicitly bars you from claiming the title of being fully vaccinated.

This gives the U.S. government wiggle room. That's something they are likely going to need. The reason? Canada isn't the only country to adopt a mix-and-match approach. Countries such as France, Germany, and Italy have taken a similar approach to vaccinating their populations. So have Finland, Indonesia, and Thailand. Penalizing U.S.-bound visitors from those countries owing to domestic inoculation efforts risks drawing public ire on two fronts.

The first is political. A mix-and-match approach to vaccination was adopted by many countries in part because there wasn't enough of one vaccine type to go around. The reason? The U.S. was busy hoarding global supply. President Joe Biden wanted to see every American vaccinated, which prompted him to refuse shipping vaccines abroad. But vaccine-hesitant Americans felt differently, which has culminated in more than 15 million vaccines being thrown away owing to disuse. Given this reality, the U.S. is poorly poised to fault other countries for their approach to vaccination.

More importantly, a hard line approach to jabs risks drawing the ire of U.S. businesses, most notably, the airline industry. When it comes to the pandemic, few industries have lost as much cash (and laid off as many workers) as U.S. carriers. At the height of the pandemic, American Airlines was burning through $89 million per day; hardly chump change.

The carrier – and its counterparts – need to stem those losses and getting people to fly is a surefire way to do that. (Incidentally, pressure from the airline industry may also explain why Canadians have been able to easily fly into the U.S. during the pandemic but can't cross over the land border).

So if not for any other reason other than financial interests alone, expect the U.S. to slowly but surely embrace mixed-dose jabs. Even during a pandemic, cash is king.

Demand For Lufthansa Flights To U.S. Soars On Re-Opening

By Maria Sheahan, Reuters, September 28, 2021

https://www.msn.com/en-ca/money/topstories/demand-for-lufthansa-flights-to-u-s-soars-on-re-opening/ar-AAOUfxH?ocid=msedgdhp&pc=U531

Demand for transatlantic flights has jumped since the United States announced plans last week to re-open to fully vaccinated travellers from countries including most of Europe, German airline Lufthansa said on Tuesday, September 28.

On some days last week, bookings for transatlantic flights were up threefold from the week before, with demand on some routes nearing pre-crisis levels, it said in a statement.

The United States said last week that it would re-open in November to air travellers from 33 countries including China, India, Brazil and most of Europe who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

For the large traditional European airline players, such as British Airways-owner IAG, Lufthansa, and Air France-KLM, the decision represents a chance to recover the transatlantic routes that are key to their profits.

Lufthansa said bookings for December flights to the United States reached pre-crisis levels last week.

Both leisure and business travellers snapped up tickets for flights from Zurich and Frankfurt to New York and to Miami.

Bookings last week for Premium Economy, Business, and First Class flights to the United States were up compared to the same period in 2019.

Lufthansa said it was launching additional flights to the United States to meet the jump in demand, offering three flights daily to Miami from November on carriers Lufthansa and SWISS.

It is also considering adding more connections to New York, in addition to up to 55 weekly connections from its European hubs that it already has scheduled, to meet demand for pre-Christmas travel.

As demand for flights to the United States soars, Lufthansa is also adding more feeder flights within Germany and to its European hubs in Austria, Belgium and Switzerland.

200-411 Richmond Street E, Toronto, ON M5A 3S5
(416) 494-9224 (416) 967-6320
info@cafii.com www.cafii.com

U.S. Vaccination Requirement For Air Passengers Worries Canadians With Mixed Vaccines

U.S. Currently Doesn't Recognize People With Some COVID-19 Vaccine Mixes As Being Fully Vaccinated

By Sophia Harris, Business Reporter, CBC News, September 25, 2021

https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/mixed-vaccine-air-travel-1.6187613

Canadian travellers have been able to fly freely to the United States since the start of the pandemic, but new U.S. travel rules announced on Monday, September 20 have some Canadians with two different COVID-19 vaccine doses worried they may soon be barred from entry.

Starting in early November, the U.S. will require foreign air passengers entering the country to be fully vaccinated. The problem is, the U.S. has yet to approve mixing COVID-19 vaccines.

"I'm really worried about this U.S. policy," said Cathy Hiuser of Ancaster, Ontario, who has one dose of COVISHIELD (a brand of AstraZeneca) and one dose of Pfizer. She has booked a trip to Maui, departing November 7.

"I don't even know if I'll be able to go across the border," she said. "It's a problem."

At the same time as the U.S. introduces its vaccine requirement, the country will lift its travel ban on air passengers entering from a list of dozens of red-flagged countries.

"We'll be putting in place strict protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 from passengers flying internationally into the United States," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Monday, September 20.

CBC News asked the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) if the millions of Canadians with mixed vaccines will still be allowed to fly to the country when the vaccine requirement kicks in. The CDC said it's in the "regulatory process" phase in determining which vaccines will be accepted.

The agency also laid out its current policy: it considers people fully vaccinated when they have all recommended doses of the same COVID-19 vaccine, such as Pfizer, Moderna or AstraZeneca.

"At present, CDC does not recognize mixed vaccines," said spokesperson Kristen Nordlund.

But there are exceptions to the rule. The CDC says on its website that mixed doses of the two mRNA vaccines, Pfizer and Moderna, are acceptable in "exceptional situations," such as when the vaccine used for the first dose was no longer available.

However, a combination of AstraZeneca and an mRNA vaccine won't meet the bar, a position adopted by cruise ships departing from U.S. ports.

"Guests whose two-shot regimen consists of 1 mRNA dose (Pfizer or Moderna) with 1 AstraZeneca dose will not be considered vaccinated," states Royal Caribbean cruise line on its website. "We continue to encourage the CDC and other U.S. government officials to re-evaluate this policy."

'I Started To Cry'

Canada is one of several countries — including Germany, Italy, France and Thailand — that has doled out mixed vaccines to a number of its citizens. But there is no international consensus on the practice.

The CDC said the U.S. is conducting trials on the safety and effectiveness of mixed vaccines, and that the agency may update its vaccine recommendations once it has new data.

But that's of little comfort to Canadians with mixed doses who've already made travel plans to the U.S., such as snowbirds and those who've booked winter vacations.

In May, Norma Chrobak of Orillia, Ontario booked a special family trip to the U.S. Virgin Islands to celebrate her partner's 75th birthday. The trip consists of a week-long chartered boat cruise in February — at a cost of $26,000.

The problem is, five out of the 10 family members set to go on the trip — including Chrobak and her partner — have a mix of AstraZeneca and Moderna.

"My heart just almost exploded in my chest," said Chrobak when she learned about the coming U.S. vaccine requirement for travellers. "I started to cry."

She has already paid a $12,500 deposit and, even though she purchased travel insurance, Chrobak is unsure at this point if she can get a full refund if she must cancel the trip.

The cruise was supposed to be a surprise birthday gift for Chrobak's partner. But she's speaking publicly about it in the hopes that the Canadian government will pressure the U.S. to accept mixed vaccines.

"Somebody's got to take this bull by the horns," she said. "There's got to be something that can be done."

Canada updated its vaccination guidelines in June to recommend mixing COVID-19 vaccine doses based on emerging research that found it was both safe and effective.

On Thursday, September 23, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said Canada is in talks with the U.S. about its coming vaccine requirement for foreign air passengers.

"We have had quite a series of discussions with U.S. counterparts," she said during a news conference. "We've basically been providing some technical support to help them make a decision on the mixed dose, particularly AstraZeneca followed by an mRNA vaccine."

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The Waiting Game

Lawyer Henry Chang, who specializes in Canadian and U.S. immigration law, said he's optimistic the U.S. will soon change its position on mixed vaccines.

"My gut feeling is that they're going to have to resolve it. If not right when the vaccine requirements come in, soon after, because there are going to be too many people complaining about this," said Chang, who is with the law firm Dentons in Toronto.

If the U.S. doesn't budge on mixed vaccines come November, some Canadians will still have options. Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta are each offering third vaccine doses to people in their respective provinces who require it for travel.

But that doesn't help potential travellers such as Chrobak in Ontario, who must wait to find out the fate of her trip.

"Pretty much just feeling devastated, feeling like I have no control," she said.

Editorial: Fully Re-Open U.S.-Canada Border

By Mark Mahoney, The Daily Gazette, September 22, 2021

https://dailygazette.com/2021/09/22/editorial-fully-re-open-u-s-canada-border/

There are two things most New Yorkers haven't seen much of lately:

1) Republicans and Democrats agreeing on an issue.
2) Canada.

Travelers and business operators wishing for the full resumption of travel between the U.S. and our neighbor to the north are hoping the first one leads to the other.

The border was closed on both sides to all but non-essential travel in March 2020 at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis.

Last month, Canada finally began allowing some non-essential travel from the U.S., easing restrictions for the first time in 17 months. But on Monday, September 20, the Biden administration extended the U.S. border closure for non-essential travel for another month, until October 21.

The continued travel restrictions have raised the ire of both Republicans and Democrats in states all along the 5,500-mile-long border, including New York — creating a rare point of agreement in the country's highly polarized political environment.

When else would you expect to see Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Congresswoman Elise Stefanik fight strongly for the same result?

The closure is not just preventing tourists from enjoying a pleasurable visit to one another's country.

It's also costing the U.S. economy about $1.5 billion per month in lost business revenue. Particularly hard-hit is western New York, which is taking an $855 million annual hit thanks to a shutdown of travel.

Small businesses on both sides have been crippled by the restrictions, and Gillibrand said the continued closure is jeopardizing the health and safety of New Yorkers.

Elected officials want the U.S. to lift the restrictions sooner than October 21 and to create a public re-opening plan for Canadians who have been fully vaccinated.

The Biden administration's continued holdout on lifting travel restrictions seems to run counter to its announcement, also issued on Monday, September 20 that it would be allowing fully-vaccinated international air travelers to enter the U.S.

And there currently are no U.S. restrictions on air or ground travel among states, even those with high infection rates.

Yet, the same opportunity to travel freely is not being afforded to citizens of the U.S. and Canada who drive between the two countries.

Certainly, we don't want to promote the international spread of the coronavirus, particularly as cases of the delta variant continue to surge in the U.S.

But if the U.S. can ease restrictions on international air travel, there's no reason — with proper precautions, protocols and documentation of vaccination — that we can't loosen some of the Canada-U.S. border restrictions to help businesses and residents that depend on cross-border vehicle travel for their livelihood and enjoyment.

Republicans and Democrats have both made a strong case.

Why isn't the Biden administration listening to them?

Washington State Governor Urges Biden To Partially Re-Open US-Canada Land Border

September 27, 2021

https://www.governor.wa.gov/news-media/icymi-inslee-letter-president-biden-urges-action-point-roberts-and-border-communities

Washington State Governor Jay Inslee sent a letter last week to President Joe Biden reiterating his call for a targeted exception to border restrictions for the Point Roberts community and a partial re-opening of the U.S.-Canada land border.

The letter comes after 18 months of border closures and repeated appeals from the Governor to the Biden administration to provide relief to impacted Washington communities and businesses. Inslee also requested clarity from the administration on circumstances and conditions required for entry into the United States at the U.S.-Canadian border.

The letter reads, in part:

"These ongoing restrictions are creating real and lasting harms for the citizens of Point Roberts, Washington, which is uniquely situated given its location below the 49th Parallel, as well as communities all along the border whose economies rely on travel and tourism by Canadian travelers. As I have communicated in letters to Secretaries Antony Blinken and Alejandro Mayorkas this summer, the harms and economic depredations experienced by these communities grow more dire with each month – and each monthly extension of these blanket restrictions. As the Point Roberts Chamber of Commerce wrote on Wednesday, September 22, 2021, that community alone is in a "desperate" situation as 85 percent of their economy depends on commercial activity by Canadians that is now impossible.

"Washington State is doing its part to help these communities weather this situation. In June, I authorized $100,000 from the state's Strategic Reserve Funds to prevent the closure of the only grocery store in Point Roberts due to absence of summer travel. This week, the Washington State Department of Commerce announced a new "Border Business Relief Program" to provide grants of up to $50,000 to certain businesses impacted by the ongoing closure. The efforts of Washington State's federal Congressional delegation to identify American Rescue Plan Act resources have also been extremely welcome. Yet these measures are only a temporary solution that cannot make whole the communities that are experiencing deepening harms under restrictions that have failed to adapt to events.

"To address the needs of these communities in Washington State, I ask that you work with your staff and Cabinet to swiftly consider the following options to improve this situation:

A targeted exception for the Point Roberts community that would allow fully-vaccinated Canadians to enter Point Roberts, just as fully-vaccinated Americans may travel to Canada by land.

Identifying options to at least partially re-open the U.S.-Canada land border, with a general re-opening of the border remaining our ultimate goal.

Read the full letter here.

Canadian Snowbirds Concerned As U.S. Land Border Closure Drags On

By Saba Aziz, Global News, September 26, 2021

https://globalnews.ca/news/8206851/canada-snowbirds-COVID-19-us-border-measures/

As fall kicks off and winter approaches, Canadian snowbirds are busy planning their trips down south with greater interest this year.

While the threat of COVID-19 in Canada and the U.S. is far from over amid the spread of the Delta variant, there is an increased demand to travel compared to last year, travel insurance experts say.

"There's a pent-up demand for Canadians to travel outside of Canada, particularly to the U.S.," said Pamela Kwiatkowski, co-founder and vice president of Goose Insurance.

Since August, she said, they have seen increased activity with sales continuing to grow every day as Canadians plan and book their travel.

For now, Canadians can get to the U.S. by air, as the land border closure – imposed since March 2020 – will remain in effect until at least October 21.

That creates a few problems for those who were hoping to drive down to sunny U.S. destinations and escape Canada's harsh winter cold.

Martin Firestone, a Toronto-based travel insurance broker, said his snowbird clients typically start making their way to Florida, Arizona, California, and Texas in October and stay until April.

Their biggest concern, he said, is why they are unable to drive in their own cars but are allowed to fly with 300 other people in an airplane.

"The bottom line is those who want to leave prior to October 21 are not going anywhere and they are going to now wait for the next 30 days and see what happens then," Firestone told Global News.

"The hopes of 90 per cent of the snowbirds returning down south may diminish down to 50 per cent if they can't drive down and take their vehicles with them because I think for many it would be a very costly factor to follow up with any of the options."

Canada re-opened its land border to fully vaccinated Americans back in August.

American travellers who are fully vaccinated don't have to quarantine upon arrival in Canada, but they're required to show a negative COVID-19 test upon arrival and provide proof of vaccination by way of the ArriveCAN smartphone app or web portal.

Currently, there is no vaccine requirement for air travellers to the U.S. But starting in November, all passengers entering the U.S. will need to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken at least 72 hours prior to boarding and certification of their double vaccination status.

Some are now wondering whether the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, which is not approved in the U.S., will even be accepted.

"There's some concern there as to how that's going to be handled," said Firestone.

Daily COVID-19 cases in the U.S. have dropped since the start of September but deaths are soaring – averaging more than 1,500 per day.

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Travel insurance experts strongly recommend Canadians, especially the more vulnerable older population, get fully vaccinated before they head south.

Kwiatkowski said that since provincial health coverage does not apply to any emergency medical services and hospitalizations while travelling, it is important for snowbirds to buy an insurance policy that includes COVID-19-related expenses.

They should also make sure that besides medical expenses, their policy covers costs incurred if they have to cancel a trip, quarantine, or delay their return, she said.

"One day in the hospital can cost you $10,000 to $50,000 and no one wants to pay that price."

Firestone said more than 90 per cent of his clients are interested in travelling to the U.S. this year – up from around 30 per cent last year.

He said many have already booked their trips and made arrangements for where they will stay.

"Their attitude is 'life is short. I was away one year from this place. I'm going this year regardless.'"

Global News reached out to the Canadian Snowbird Association for comment but did not get a response by the time of publication.

Snowbirds Eye Return To Florida Even As Sunshine State Battles COVID-19

Lure Of Sunshine And Lack Of Snow Remain A Draw For Snowbirds, More Of Whom May Head South Again

By Geoff Nixon, CBC News, September 26, 2021

https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canadian-snowbirds-florida-travel-COVID-1919-pandemic-2021-1.6188657

Karen Patrick had a lovely time hanging out in New Brunswick last winter, but she'd rather have spent some of that time somewhere warmer — namely at her Florida condo.

The retired nurse last saw her condo as the grip of the global pandemic took hold and she hurriedly packed her bags amid calls from Ottawa — and her adult children — to get back across the border.

"The kids got frantic," said Patrick, 63, recalling the stress her family felt a year and a half ago.

A winter has passed since the pandemic started and another is approaching — a long stretch that has left Canadian snowbirds longing for some Florida sun.

And while Patrick, now fully vaccinated, isn't ready to return — on account of the pressure COVID-19 is putting on Florida's health system — it seems an increasing number of snowbirds are making plans to head south.

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Not What Ottawa Recommends

While these Canadian sun seekers might be Florida-bound in the months ahead, the federal government doesn't endorse the idea.

Global Affairs Canada said Friday it still recommends Canadians avoid "all non-essential travel" outside the country, reiterating a stance Ottawa has held since the pandemic started.

Dr. Erica Weir, a public health physician in eastern Ontario, understands why people want to get away but concurs with the government.

"I would advise against non-essential travel and against travelling into an area with high COVID-19 activity, especially with the uncertainty posed by new variants," she said by email.

Yet, just like last year, the situation won't hold some snowbirds back.

Tired Of Winter

"They're not going to spend another winter in Canada," Wallace Weylie, legal counsel for the Canadian Snowbird Association, told the Sarasota Herald-Tribune newspaper this week.

Both Air Canada and WestJet say they're seeing indications Canadians want some time in the sun.

In an email, Air Canada spokesperson Peter Fitzpatrick said there's "strong demand" for leisure travel to U.S. destinations — including to California, Florida and Hawaii — "with many of these markets on pace with 2019 levels."

WestJet is also seeing a desire for sun travel, according to Morgan Bell, the company's manager of media and public relations. But she said "demand remains inconsistent and challenging to predict" due to "fragmented" travel rules.

The Wait Is Over … For Some

Snowbirds who go to Florida in the immediate future will fly there, as the U.S. land border remains closed to non-essential travel.

That's how Mike Shea, a double-vaccinated retired Ontarian, got to Florida this past Monday — his first time back since the pandemic started.

So far, he hasn't found the crowds to be too concerning at the grocery stores and golf courses he's been visiting near St. Petersburg, Fla.

"It's not busy," said Shea, 68, who's made seasonal treks to Florida for the past 40 years.

This year, he's arrived as Florida grapples with serious COVID-19 challenges.

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To date, Florida has seen more than 3.5 million COVID-19 cases overall and more than 50,000 deaths. These figures far exceed Canada's nearly 1.6 million total coronavirus infections and more than 27,000 deaths. The state's hospitals have been hard hit with cases.

Shea's being as cautious as he can — spending time only with a few friends, all of whom are also vaccinated.

"We just watch ourselves," said Shea.

Dr. Samir Sinha says any snowbirds considering a trip to Florida should consider the added risks they're facing as older adults.

"With more COVID-19 spreading and [a] more highly unvaccinated population there, there's a greater risk that they might contract COVID-19," said Sinha, the director of geriatrics at Toronto's Mount Sinai and University Health Network hospitals.

He said they're also travelling to a place where the health-care system "is quite overwhelmed" in places and that might limit their access to care, especially if they lack adequate insurance.

Not The Typical Trip This Year

Edmonton's Serge Dupuis would like to go to Florida with his wife after Christmas, but that will depend on a variety of factors — including whether they're able to drive down.

Before the pandemic, the couple would often make pit stops to see friends in the U.S. during the multi-day drive to their mobile home, which is located near Tampa, Fla.

"It's a nice way to go and we take seven or eight days to go [there]," said Dupuis, 69, who was last in Florida as the pandemic emerged.

If they end up going this winter, Dupuis said they'll be doing things differently — avoiding crowds for starters.

"We're not going to go to sports events, we're not going to go to farmers' markets, flea markets, those kinds of things," said Dupuis. "That doesn't mean that we can't enjoy ourselves — obviously having plus 30 degrees is better than having –30 [degrees] in Edmonton."

For Dupuis, it's not just what he'll get to do in Florida, but what he won't have to put up with back home.

"Getting out over the winter, not having to shovel the snow and you know, enjoying the sunshine," he said.

But for Patrick, the retired nurse, the risks are still too high. She's opting to stay in Canada this October despite Florida's allure.

She's worried care would be hard to come by if she needed anything.

"I'm not taking any chances," she said.

Travellers To PEI To Be Tested For COVID-19 At Its Borders Starting Thursday, September 30

By Keith Doucette, The Canadian Press, September 29, 2021

https://globalnews.ca/news/8227858/pei-COVID-19-border-testing-delta/

Rising COVID-19 cases in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere in the country are leading Prince Edward Island to increase testing at its points of entry, chief public health officer Dr. Heather Morrison said on Tuesday, September 28.

Starting Thursday, September 30, anyone travelling to the province will be tested regardless of their vaccination status – including Island residents returning home from travel, Morrison told reporters.

“As PEI and other jurisdictions struggle to manage the Delta variant and the fourth wave of this pandemic, we need to take steps to protect Islanders,” she said. She also recommended that travellers 12 and older be tested again between the fourth and eighth day after they enter the province.

School-aged children under 12 who return to PEI from travelling will also be required to test negative for COVID-19 before they can go back to school, Morrison said. Unvaccinated or partially vaccinated travellers, she added, will need to isolate for eight days upon entry and then be tested once again.

The province’s PEI pass, which permits entry onto the Island, will now only be issued to people who can show they are at least two weeks removed from their second COVID-19 vaccine dose, she sad.

“The changes announced today are steps that will continue to help us limit importation, detect cases early, and contain the transmission of COVID-19,” Morrison said.

Meanwhile, she reported two new cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, September 28, bringing the number of active cases in the province to nine. One case involved a close household contact of a previously reported infection tied to an outbreak at Charlottetown’s West Royalty Elementary School, and the other case involved a person in their 50s who recently travelled outside of Atlantic Canada.

Morrison said that since August, 87 per cent of the Island’s cases have been identified as the Delta variant, adding that about 98 per cent of infections identified in the country in the last week have been the Delta mutation.

“The latest modelling from the Public Health Agency of Canada predicts that we will continue to see a resurgence and spread of the Delta variant well into the fall,” she said.

At the same time last year, the province had recorded a total of 58 cases of COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic, Morrison said. By contrast, she added, the Island has reported 63 cases in September 2021 alone.

"As we have seen in the last month, and similar to other jurisdictions, COVID-19 continues to be a threat to PEI," she said.

Newfoundland Tightens Border Measures, Bursts Atlantic Bubble

By Peter Jackson, The Telegram, September 29, 2021

Province tightens border measures, bursts Atlantic bubble (msn.com)

As COVID-19 cases continue to climb across the country, Newfoundland and Labrador is tightening up its borders again to try to keep the highly transmissible delta variant from overwhelming the province's health system.

Dr. Rosann Seviour, acting chief medical officer of health, said on Tuesday, September 28 that contact tracing and testing in the central region of the province has put a considerable strain on resources.

"This, combined with several other clusters in recent weeks, is putting significant demand on our frontline public health resources for contact tracing," she said at a news briefing. "When Public Health capacity is overwhelmed, this is a signal that we need to strengthen our public health measures."

As of midnight on Wednesday, September 29, partially vaccinated Canadians will no longer be free from self-isolation requirements as fully vaccinated travellers are.

They will be treated the same as unvaccinated passengers and have to self-isolate for 14 days, or for less if they get a negative test result any time after seven days.

The province is also bowing out of the Atlantic bubble.

"This means that travellers from Atlantic Canada must declare their vaccination status, and isolate if partially vaccinated or unvaccinated, similar to travellers from the rest of the country," Seviour said.

"Having an Atlantic bubble was low risk in the summer when the entire region had similar and favourable epidemiology. That is changing, and we are starting to see unfavourable epidemiology across the region as the fourth wave carries on across the country."

The change does not apply to those travelling between adjacent border communities in Quebec and Labrador.

Seviour said delta has proven to be a much different foe from the original novel coronavirus that hit in the winter of 2020.

"The emerging evidence on delta tells us that one dose alone does not provide sufficient protection," she said, explaining the change in vaccination guidelines.

Delta has also changed the level of immunity we need in the province, she said.

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The end goal used to be 80 per cent of the eligible populations. Now we need 90.

"I believe we can get there," she said, adding that more than 88 per cent of eligible residents already have at least one dose.

The main focus remains younger adults, who universally fall below the 70 per cent fully vaccinated rate.

"This age group is known to have more contacts through work, social activities, and sports," she said.

"No one is an island. We all are part of a community, and we all need to do our part to protect those around us, especially the children who cannot yet be vaccinated."

She also encouraged everyone to stick with tried and true personal precautions.

"We need everyone to dust off their personal protective health measures, especially as the cold weather approaches and we move to more indoor activities," she said.

That includes being mindful of close contacts, masking up indoors, keeping one's distance, and washing your hands frequently.

As for the strain on Public Health, Health Minister Dr. John Haggie offered a solution that seems to have fallen flat in most jurisdictions.

"There is still something we each can do that would help contact tracing. It is the COVID-19 Alert app. If you have a smart phone, this information is secure, it is safe, and it will provide contact tracing information should this be needed. I would encourage you to once again look at that app and put it on your phone."

Ontario Government Pledges $100-Million To Help Tourism Sector Recover From COVID-19 Pandemic

By The Canadian Press, September 27, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-ontario-government-pledges-100-million-to-help-tourism-sector-recover/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Coronavirus%20Update&utm_content=2021-9-27_20&utm_term=Coronavirus%20Update:%20Kids%20spared%20worst%20of%20COVID-19,%20but%20Delta%20variant%20causes%20concern%20&utm_campaign=newsletter&cu_id=Ts6FwhWx6n2rSHC0x7MiReEeeFJOJkTb

Ontario will invest $100 million in the province's tourism sector to help it recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Tourism Minister Lisa MacLeod said on Monday, September 27 that the money will be distributed through the new Tourism Recovery Program, which will help for-profit tourism businesses in the attraction, accommodation, and leisure travel sectors.

"The last 18 months of the pandemic have been the most challenging Ontario's tourism industry has ever faced," said MacLeod. "Previously, an economic powerhouse for the province, tourism has been hit by the triple threat that COVID-19 represents — a health, economic, and social crisis."

MacLeod said that the funding will help support regionally significant businesses, while protecting jobs in communities that rely on the tourism industry.

Eligible tourism businesses include inns and lodges, boat tours, ski centres, live performance venues, cinemas, drive-in theatres, and amusement and water parks.

The province said the program will support tourism businesses that have experienced a loss of at least 50 per cent of eligible revenue in 2020-21 compared to 2019.

Applications for the program open on October 13.

NDP legislator Michael Mantha, who serves as the tourism critic for the Opposition, said that the funding is "long overdue" and needs to be delivered faster.

"Waiting so long for this long-promised OTRP could be the last straw for some tourism business operators, who have done everything possible to keep their dreams alive and their staff teams employed," said Mantha.

Canada To Lure U.S. Frequent Flyers By Matching Travel Perks On Air Canada

By Allison Lampert, Reuters, September 27, 2021

https://www.msn.com/en-ca/money/topstories/exclusive-canada-to-lure-u-s-frequent-flyers-by-matching-travel-perks-on-air-canada/ar-AAORFOH?ocid=msedgdhp&pc=U531

Canada is trying to use the lure of travel perks to convince America's frequent flying elite to fly north on Air Canada, as the country steps up efforts to revive crucial traffic from the United States, a Canadian official told Reuters.

COVID-19 has battered travel from Canada's largest tourism market. During the first half of 2021, Canada had about 178,000 overnight arrivals from the United States, compared with 6.8 million during the same period in 2019, according to government data.

To help reverse that decline, government tourism body, Destination Canada, will roll out on Monday, September 27 its first campaign targeting U.S. frequent fliers.

It is part of broader, C$14 million efforts by the tourism commission to boost traffic after Canada recently opened its borders to vaccinated travellers. It is not clear how much the specific frequent flyer campaign will cost.

"This is super-focused in terms of our ability to reach frequent fliers," said Gloria Loree, Destination Canada's chief marketing officer ahead of the launch.

Under the plan, up to 20,000 U.S. frequent flyers with carriers such as American Airlines, Southwest Airlines, and Delta Air Lines could get matching status when flying Air Canada north of the border.

It is not clear how U.S. carriers would react to the plan, although Loree said the possibility of airline retaliation had been considered.

Frequent-flyer status gives travelers perks such as priority boarding that would normally cost a premium fare or a fee.

While global airline alliances offer status-matching to passengers from their member carriers, having a destination sponsor such a plan is highly unusual, said Mark-Ross Smith, chief executive of Status Match, which handles logistics for the Canadian project.

"This is the push to get them coming to Canada."

Eligible U.S. frequent flyers who book and travel north on AC before January 15, 2022 will keep their status with the carrier for all of 2022, she said.

It comes as countries ease restrictions on international travel, with the United States set to re-open in November to vaccinated air travelers from 33 countries.

She argued boosting cross-border travel will help both countries.

Loree said funding frequent-flyer status matching is no different from other incentives paid for by Destination Canada, such as a separate campaign this year with Air Canada's rival WestJet Airlines.

Loree said the goal is to restore routes from the United States, while trying to attract travelers who will return to Canada.

In April, hard-hit Air Canada received an estimated C$5.9 billion government aid package with the country gaining a roughly 6% stake in the carrier.

While Canada's high vaccination rate could lure tourists, the cost of the country's PCR test requirements for arrivals could dissuade some travelers, said Frederic Dimanche, director of the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University.

Loree said targeting U.S. frequent fliers is a plus because they are largely accustomed to those requirements.

"They've figured out how to travel," Loree said. "So we want them to consider Canada as their next trip."

Direct Flights From India Resume As Transport Canada Lifts Travel Ban

By The Canadian Press, September 27, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-direct-flights-from-india-resume-as-transport-canada-lifts-travel-ban/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Evening%20Update&utm_content=2021-9-27_17&utm_term=Evening%20Update:%20Annamie%20Paul%20steps%20down%20as%20leader%20of%20the%20Green%20Party%20of%20Canada&utm_campaign=newsletter&cu_id=Ts6FwhWx6n2rSHC0x7MiReEeeFJOJkTb

Direct passenger flights to Canada from India resumed on Monday, September 27 as Transport Canada lifted a months-long ban imposed due to high COVID-19 case counts.

In a post on Twitter, Transport Canada said direct flights from India can land in Canada, but travellers must have a negative COVID-19 test from an approved laboratory at the New Delhi airport no more than 18 hours before their departure.

“Beginning at 00:01 EDT on September 27, direct flights from India can land in Canada with additional public health measures in place,” the department said.

“Travellers must have proof of a negative COVID-19 molecular test from the approved Genestrings Laboratory at the Delhi airport taken within 18 hours of the scheduled departure of their direct flight to Canada.”

Air Canada flight data shows that a direct flight from Delhi landed at Toronto’s international airport early on the morning of Monday, September 27.

But one family's journey raises questions about whether the direct flight ban had the intended impact.

Hari Gopal Garg and his wife Komal Garg travelled from Toronto to India to adopt a baby girl, Kaveri, and were set to return to Canada on April 25, three days after direct flights were banned.

The family decided to make a long trip back home, travelling through two other countries, so Garg could get back to work and they could resume their lives, he said.

Garg and his family began their journey on June 8, travelling from India to Paris to Mexico, before landing in Canada six days later. Their travel included a three-day stay in Mexico and COVID-19 tests at every stop.

"We were very nervous," he said on Monday, September 27.

"You are contacting so many people on the way. You are changing flights. You are staying in hotels. It's like the government created more ways to spread COVID-19. Otherwise, you could come just directly without having so many touch points."

The family spent about $6,000 on the trip, including hotel stays. The trip would have otherwise cost them about $2,000.

"I don't think the flight ban helped at all," Garg said.

"It created more problems for people who genuinely travelled and had a valid reason. It created more problems, more money spent and more mental stress. So, it didn't solve any purpose."

But Garg said he is "happy" that flights between the countries have resumed because there are a number of older people and families with children who may not have been able to make the long and expensive journey to Canada.

"I just hope the government makes some rational decisions in the future without any hidden political agendas," Garg said.

"Think about the people who are suffering because of these and then make some wise decisions."

Transport Canada announced in a news release last week an extension to the ban on all direct commercial and private passenger flights to Canada from India through Sunday.

The department said that following the end of the ban, airlines would be checking travellers' COVID-19 test results and confirming that fully vaccinated passengers had uploaded their information to the ArriveCAN mobile app or website.

Travellers who come to Canada from India via an indirect route must obtain, within 72 hours of departure, a negative COVID-19 molecular test from a third country, other than India, before continuing their journey to Canada.

What COVID-19 Vaccine Passports Mean For International Travellers

By Heather Greenwood Davis, Special To The Globe And Mail, September 29, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/article-what-COVID-19-vaccine-passports-mean-for-international-travellers/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Evening%20Update&utm_content=2021-9-29_17&utm_term=Evening%20Update:%20Ottawa%20loses%20pair%20of%20Federal%20Court%20appeals%20on%20public%20services%20for%20Indigenous%20children&utm_campaign=newsletter&cu_id=Ts6FwhWx6n2rSHC0x7MiReEeeFJOJkTb

I'm on a layover in the Montreal airport, on my way to Switzerland, and I really want a burger. The only thing standing in my way: proof of vaccination. Quebec's new rules for indoor dining demand it. I pull out my paper receipt verifying I'm fully vaccinated, am invited in, and prepare to remove my mask and savour my meal. That's when it dawns on me that with no requirement for vaccination to enter the airport itself, nothing protects me as I eat in the airport restaurant, which is not walled in, from the potentially COVID-19-carrying traveller sitting at the neighbouring gate, except the waist-high, decorative planter between us. I could literally hand him a fry. And who knows what I might receive in return. The plan has some flaws.

While Canadians may still be pondering the merits of a national COVID-19 vaccine passport, anyone considering international travel will quickly realize that abroad, there's no debate. Documents like the EU pass have become the international equivalents of a green light. Without one of those QR code-emblazoned records, your vacation may disappear. And even for travellers with an accepted proof of vaccination, there is still much to consider, including a tourism work force that is depleted globally and the lack of consistent rules on what documentation is required and what exactly it is required for.

I figured that out in mid-September when I travelled outside of the country for the first time since the pandemic started. I arrived in Switzerland two days before their national vaccine passport mandate went into effect. Without a QR code, my only option to access indoor amenities was constant testing. Here's what that looked like.

Monday

Testing is the first order of business in Geneva this morning. A negative PCR test buys me three days of entry into indoor amenities, but the results can take several hours to arrive. If I want to eat lunch inside today, I'll need a rapid antigen test as well. Those results are available in about 30 minutes but grant me only 48 hours. Luckily, tests in Switzerland are easy to find. Walking down any main street in almost every city I visit, I can spot the signs in windows and on sidewalks or the telltale lines – avoidable if you book an appointment. My two tests today cost about $200. And despite having no reason to suspect I might be positive, waiting for the negative result is excruciating. It arrives in an easy to download app, I exhale, happy I can eat lunch anywhere I want, and depart to my next destination: Zurich.

I meet my first "COVID-19 bouncer" at the iconic Dolder Grand hotel that afternoon. Standing at a table cordoned off by stanchions, the man asks to see both my test and my passport. Once scanned I'm allowed into the grand lobby. Another traveller, who skipped the rapid test in favour of a PCR, hasn't received their results and is forced to return to the train station to get one before being allowed entry. There is no leeway here.

A Tourism Bubble

At check-in, one of the clerks expresses a welcome before gesturing to my mask and gently reminding me: "You can take that off if you wish. You won't need that here."

Unlike the Montreal airport, every guest inside this building is "safe." They are either fully vaccinated, have proven they're recovered from COVID-19, or have a negative test result like me. I remove my mask and am surprised by my relief. I feel nervous, but by the time I'm headed to dinner I'm happily reminded what lipstick looks like, and two years of stress seem to melt from my shoulders.

By breakfast the next morning not wearing a mask feels natural. But on checkout, the real world returns. The bouncer is at his post, his table laden with masks for guests heading out. I hesitate at the door and consider living here forever, but eventually leave for the train station.

Proof of vaccination isn't required on trains. Masks, on the other hand, are and ticket checkers reprimand a couple for wearing theirs on their chins, noses and mouths exposed. Hopping on and off trains I feel the old fatigue return. On for the train ride, off when we exit the station. And what to do when the stations are semi-open air? No one seems to know, with some keeping their masks in place, and others removing them.

I soon learn that each hotel is making its own rules. On arrival at the Suvretta House in St. Moritz, there is no bouncer, but before my room key is provided, the QR code on my test result is scanned, and masks are required outside my guest room. The same is true at La Reserve Eden au Lac when I return to Zurich five days later.

Thursday

Test three happens in Bad Ragaz. The on-site medical clinic at my hotel makes it convenient and tilting my head back for the rapid test while exhaling through my mouth (a tip from a colleague) makes the process less painful. By the time I sit down to breakfast, I have my negative result and another 48 hours to play with.

At dinner, I'm joined by Mark Stalder, PR manager for the Grand Resort Bad Ragaz, who points out that the property, which is home to three hotels and more than seven eateries, is too big, with too many exits, to effectively implement a bouncer strategy. Instead, my QR code functions like a multiple-entry ticket.

I have to show it to eat in a restaurant, to use the thermal waters, or to swim, and I must wear a mask in between. In theory, I could book a room without a code but would be limited to room service and an outdoor pool. Another point to consider: Swiss rules do not require mandatory staff vaccination. It explains why staff are masked.

There are other bumps that tourists will want to keep in mind. When I head to St. Gallen to see the famed Abbey library, I instinctively quicken my step to beat a large tour group to the ticket counter. It was a good move. The days where their guide could quickly flash a pass and usher them through are over. They each have to line up individually to show their code and ID. It easily leads to frustration, which shows on the face of the guide, who continuously checks his watch.

Saturday

Test number four is in Vevey. On check-in at the Grand Hotel de Lac, my code gets me a white ribbon bracelet that tells the world I'm "COVID-19 clean." (At Victoria Jungfrau Grand Hotel & Spa, the wristband changes colour daily to thwart copycats.) But this morning, I'll need to get another test in order to keep it. The hotel has organized a medic for hotel guests ("Pop down in your bathrobe!" I'm told), but a mix-up means I'll need to travel to neighbouring Montreux, a 10-minute cab ride away. By now, the test feels rote. Thirty minutes later, as I'm enjoying a tea at Villa Le Lac Le Corbusier, a UNESCO recognized architectural gem, I barely remember I've had it. But onward travel to Denmark and returning home means three more tests, ranging in cost from free (a rapid test at the Billund airport) to more than $200. An added expense? Without a doubt. Worth it to feel the freedom of travel? For me: Absolutely.

One last note: The rules are always evolving. The latest from Switzerland: "Switzerland is open for fully vaccinated Canadians. Neither a test nor quarantine are required upon arrival," Switzerland Tourism Canada director Pascal Prinz explains in an e-mail. "In a transition period until October 24, a simple proof/receipt of vaccination by the Canadian authorities is sufficient. Thereafter, the Swiss Cantons will provide a portal for guests vaccinated abroad (including Canadians) to be able to receive a Swiss vaccination certificate. The portal is expected to be operational by October 24, 2021."

Ireland Is Welcoming Back Tourists With Travel Packages And Round Trip Flights From $359

By Cailey Rizzo, Travel + Leisure, September 27, 2021

https://www.msn.com/en-ca/lifestyle/travel/news/ireland-is-welcoming-back-tourists-with-travel-packages-and-round-trip-flights-from-359/ar-AAOSLkH?ocid=msedgdhp&pc=U531

If you've been itching for a vacation, Ireland is calling for Americans to "Press the Green Button" and book a getaway.

The country re-opened borders to non-essential travel in July and is encouraging travelers to return with the help of tempting discounts on flights and accommodations.

Tourism Ireland is offering packages for all sorts of travelers; from luxury seekers looking to stay in the country's best castles to writers hunting for inspiration. The tourism authority has partnered with airlines and top destinations around the country to offer the best of Ireland at unbeatable prices.

Aer Lingus is offering roundtrip flights from the U.S., starting at only $359 from Oct. 1 until Feb. 17, 2022 and a six-night vacation, including flights is available from only $699 per person.

Tour company Celtic Tours is offering savings of $300 per person when you book an 11-night journey across the country using the promo code "GB600CD." Travelers looking for tours of castles and manors can save $250 per person when they book through Isle Inn Tours. Or tour through the best of Ireland's pubs with your own private driver and save $250.

Over the next few months, Ireland will come alive with even more offerings when the country celebrates 100 years since the signing of its constitution. In its honor, a variety of events and experiences are planned around Dublin, particularly at The Shelbourne hotel where the constitution was drafted and signed.

Ireland will also add six sites on UNESCO's World Heritage Site Tentative List in 2022, including the Passage Tomb landscape of County Sligo and the cultural landscape of the Burren Uplands in County Clare. Tourism officials recommend that visitors check out these sites now before they're put on UNESCO's official list and hit the radar of global travelers.

The country currently requires visitors to present a negative COVID-19 test, taken within three days of arrival. Quarantine isn't necessary for vaccinated travelers or those who have recently recovered from COVID-19.

For more information on deals available through "Press the Green Button," visit the Tourism Ireland website.

Australia’s Borders Could Open By Christmas—Here’s What That Means For Travelers

By Rachel Chang, Conde Nast Traveler, September 27, 2021

Australia’s Borders Could Open By Christmas—Here’s What That Means for Travelers (msn.com)

There’s new hope for travelers dreaming of visiting Australia, whose borders have been sealed off to both inbound and outbound travel since March 2020. While plans for the re-opening were originally forecasted to be mid-2022, restrictions could be lifted as soon as the end of December—if vaccination rates stay on track.

“I do empathize with the Australians who have been denied the opportunity to travel overseas this year," the country’s Tourism Minister Dan Tehan said on Wednesday, September 22 at the National Press Club of Australia, according to CNN.

"It's another reason why everyone should get vaccinated and we have to stick to the national plan that will see our international border open up—at this rate by Christmas at the latest."

The national plan, which was laid out this summer, states that Australia can fully "open international borders" as part of its "final post-vaccination phase," which requires the average vaccination rate across the country to be at least 80 percent, and will apply to jurisdictions that reach the rate. When that goal is reached, measures may still include quarantining of high-risk inbound travel, but will allow inbound arrivals for vaccinated people without quarantine, as well as non-vaccinated people with pre-flight and arrival testing.

Phillipa Harrison, Managing Director for Tourism Australia, says that "good progress" is being made with the vaccination target rates and says, "Australia is really looking forward to welcoming back our much-loved travelers from the United States as soon as we are able to do so."

That said, specifics are still up in the air, as the plan outlines a gradual welcoming of inbound travelers through transition and consolidation phases that may start with visitors from only particular countries. Even so, preparations have begun. Qantas announced plans to resume service between the U.S. and Australia in December—but mass tourism may lag behind a bit. "Whilst there is no exact date for international leisure travel to resume as yet, Australia is on track to return to greater freedoms by year's end and for our international borders to re-open gradually from December 2021," Brooke Garnett Chalk of Maya Maya Travel says. "Based on these plans and current vaccination rates locally, we anticipate broader quarantine-free travel for vaccinated leisure travelers from low-risk countries to resume in Q2 2022."

The slow and steady approach is a hallmark of Australia's handling of the pandemic, which has been seen as one of the most stringent—marking just how carefully the re-opening is being handled. "It is fantastic news and we certainly hope to welcome back our international travelers sooner than later, but we are being very cautious about when and who will be allowed into Australia and what rules they will need to follow," Denis Page of Asia-Pacific travel company Longitude 80 says, adding that some Australian states are still currently in lockdown, and domestic travel is still limited.

Page also notes that the best-laid plans are always subject to change, as seen by the Australia and New Zealand travel bubble launched in the spring, which was suspended by July because of outbreaks. While new travel bubbles have been explored, possibly with Singapore and other destinations in the Pacific, the Delta variant seems to be putting a wrench in that step. On top of that, Australians still can't leave the country unless they have very specific needs—a policy that has been in place for 18 months—making the finish line to border re-opening being only three months away seem like a lofty goal.

Even so, travel specialists agree that early planning is the key to booking an Australian vacation. Donna Thomas of New Zealand Travel is seeing inquiries for March and April, as well as a trend toward booking with safety measures in place, like by hiring private drivers. "I also believe there will be a larger influx to the countryside more than cities as travelers want outdoor dining and experiences in the fresh air," she says. "Destinations like Tasmania, Kangaroo Island, Barrier Reef, wine country, Lizard Island, Lord Howe Island, The Whitsundays, and the Outback will receive a hearty and renewed interest due to their magnificent outdoor possibilities."

Also essential for travel planning is flexibility, especially as policies are being hammered out. "After so much success at keeping the virus at bay, expect a very conservative approach from the start," Grey says. "Vaccinations will be a must and initially it is likely that mask-wearing indoors will be mandatory [and there] might be restrictions between states—some states that are going to be much slower than others. For the next year it is best to assume that quarantine or a lock-down may be a part of an Australian journey." She suggests visitors opt for traveler's insurance and be prepared to pay for stays at government-approved quarantine hotels, if needed.

But it's also a good time to think creatively about itineraries, Page says. "We will definitely encourage experiencing Australia in a different way, like with private islands on the Great Barrier, the Outback on a remote farm, and I am very keen on Tasmania and the west coast," he says. "Australia is a gigantic continent and if you plan a trip well with the help of travel designers or agents who have the experience of Australia, then 'She'll be right,' as we say here."

The country is no doubt ready to welcome back travelers from the U.S. since pre-COVID-19, as Americans were the third largest market with 811,900 visitors a year and second largest for visitor spend with $4 billion AUD (about $2.9 billion USD). "Tourism Australia continues to be very active in the United States to keep Australia top of mind for when travel between our nations resumes, so we can move quickly to rebuild travel from one of our most important tourism markets," Harrison says.

And Aussies believe that the allure of Australia will be even more valuable once restrictions are lifted. "Australia, the size of the USA with around 25 million people, will likely have even more appeal than before," Penny Rafferty of Luxury Lodge of Australia says. "Not because it has changed, but because people have had the opportunity to really assess how much they value and what they value in travel."

Cool Your Jets: International Tourism For Australians By Christmas Unlikely, Airlines Say

One Source Says It's 'Naive' To Expect Pre-Pandemic Travel With Uncertainty Over Quarantine And Vaccine Passports To Limit Airlines' Commercial Viability

By Elias Visontay, The Guardian, September 29, 2021

https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/sep/29/cool-your-jets-international-tourism-for-australians-by-christmas-unlikely-airlines-say?utm_term=785894b739e51646f910c76efcc7df82&utm_campaign=MorningMailAUS&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=morningmailau_email

Foreign airlines say international tourism is unlikely to resume by Christmas for Australians because there's too much uncertainty surrounding quarantine requirements and vaccine passports, with one source dismissing the Morrison government's timetable as "naive".

Even when the international border re-opens, flights in and out of Australia will operate at a "fraction of pre-pandemic levels" due to home quarantine requirements, the airlines have warned.

200-411 Richmond Street E, Toronto, ON M5A 3S5
☎ (416) 494-9224 🖷 (416) 967-6320
info@cafii.com www.cafii.com

That means Australians eager to fly overseas could face difficulty securing tickets, the Board of Airline Representatives of Australia (Bara), which represents airlines including Emirates, Etihad and United, said on Wednesday, September 29.

The federal government has foreshadowed that the international border will re-open by Christmas with seven-day home quarantine for vaccinated travellers entering the country. That, Bara argued, was unlikely to facilitate the return of a commercially viable international aviation industry in the short term.

A core chunk of pre-pandemic travellers were tourists and foreigners without an Australian home to isolate in. They are unlikely to pick the country as a destination in early 2022 if they have to forfeit a week and pay for quarantine accommodation – even if it can be a holiday destination.

This will keep international flight service in – and out – of Australia "at a modest fraction of pre-pandemic levels," Bara said.

As a result, international airlines believe most of their Australian services in the coming months will be repatriating Australians only. That will serve as a "stepping stone" before they are ready to facilitate outbound and inbound tourism in several months' time.

The airlines' frustration appears at odds with comments from the New South Wales premier, Gladys Berejiklian, and the prime minister, Scott Morrison, that fully vaccinated arrivals would be able to bypass hotel quarantine when international travel resumed.

Bara's tone was also in stark contrast to the fanfare triggered by Qantas earlier this month when it advertised international flights from mid-December.

The suggestion that international flights would soon resume sparked excitement in Australia, according to a survey of traveller sentiment, which suggested 59% of people planned to catch a flight, either international or domestic, by March.

However, uncertainty over quarantine and border rules remains a barrier to Australians booking holidays. Of the 4,500 Australians who responded to Inmarsat's 2021 Passenger Confidence Tracker survey, 53% said they were concerned about quarantine requirements and 40% said they were worried about unpredictable border closures affecting their travel.

Foreign airlines want clarity on key issues, including how home quarantine will work when the international border re-opens.

One airline source said "people are awestruck and everyone is so excited to go overseas again and think they'll be going anywhere they want in 2022 – but that is just so naïve."

Bara said it was "simply an unworkable proposition" for airlines to begin selling new tickets into Australia above current quarantine arrival caps without knowing how many passengers they will be allowed to carry or how their vaccine status to qualify for home quarantine will be checked.

The board wants to know from Australian governments: how hotel quarantine caps for unvaccinated travellers will work; how airlines will recognize Australians immunized with foreign vaccines; how tickets will be sold and vaccine requirements enforced; whether a negative pre-departure test will be required to enter Australia; and if rules for aircrews will be relaxed.

Barry Abrams, the executive director of Bara, told Guardian Australia that the existing international ticketing system used by airlines did not allow them to obtain a record of vaccination, nor automatically check the authenticity of that proof, at the point of booking. It was also unclear how foreign vaccine proof would be recognized, he said.

Australian border officials needed to explain how they would police vaccination status and confirm that Australia would be responsible for it.

There was the issue, too, of how to sell seats on flights for unvaccinated passengers – for carriers willing to take them – as airlines remained in the dark as to what their passenger allocations would be.

"This is because global ticketing systems are not designed to sell a tiered number of tickets for individual flights based on passengers' vaccination status, which is unknown to airlines at the point of sale" Bara said in its monthly airline views document.

Another key issue for airlines is whether the requirement for all arrivals into Australia to provide a negative PCR test that was taken 72 hours before departure will still be in place for fully vaccinated travellers heading into home quarantine.

"The issue is that Australians are looking at the low number of people in hotel quarantine right now, but that's not an accurate reflection of the number of Australians wanting to come home who are infected with COVID-19," Abrams said.

He said that airlines were seeing up to 5% of Australians booked on flights home forced to abandon their seats at the last minute due to a positive PCR test – far higher than the proportion of positive cases in hotel quarantine right now.

"For every 20 flights of Australians going overseas, that would mean one entire flight of passengers unable to board a flight home. Airlines and passengers need to know if a negative test or any virus in the system, even for vaccinated travellers, will mean they can't board their flight back.

"To be an airline scheduling flights to Australia now is taking on all of the risk from the government's lack of clarity."

Singapore Airlines – also a member of Bara – was earlier this month forced to cut the number of flights flying into Australia, citing a lack of information from government.

A spokesperson for the airline said "while we continue to seek clarity on how the Australian government plans to treat inbound arrivals to Australia for those vaccinated overseas, we remain committed to keeping Australia connected in a safe manner and have the ability to deploy more capacity should demand warrant."

More than 45,000 Australians stranded overseas have registered for government assistance to return home. Australia's current international passenger intake is 2,285 people a week, and has been significantly cut during the country's current Delta variant outbreak.

Norwegian Cruise Line CEO Talks COVID-19 Protocol, Family Travel, And The Future Of Cruising

By Alison Fox, Travel + Leisure, September 28, 2021

[Norwegian Cruise Line CEO Talks COVID-19 Protocol, Family Travel, and the Future of Cruising (msn.com)]

Norwegian Cruise Line's president expects things to feel normal again by the second or third quarter of next year — but still has a positive outlook for the future of cruising.

"Every day, every week should be a little better than the week before," Harry Sommer, the president and CEO of Norwegian Cruise Line, said in an interview with Cruise Critic ahead of the launch of the Norwegian Breakaway, the first major cruise ship to sail from New York City since the pandemic.

Sommer said there have been highs and lows as Norwegian saw a decrease in bookings as the number of COVID-19 cases increased, but saw an increase in bookings after the U.S. announced it would lift travel restrictions on vaccinated foreign visitors in November.

But he's not worried either way.

"We're in no rush. Our main goal now is to get our ships up and running," he said. "We're happy to have reduced occupancies so that we can provide an excellent product, with social distance, no crowding, no lines anywhere. It's working great. And making sure that if we do get the occasional COVID-19 case, that we have all of our internal protocols in order, and we show that there's never any spread."

Norwegian first started sailing in Europe in July with trips out of Athens. Now, the company is sailing from Miami, Seattle, and New York in the United States, having won a court battle defending its vaccination policy, one of the strictest in the industry. The company requires every passenger who boards to be fully vaccinated through at least the end of the year.

Looking ahead, Sommer said he's hopeful younger children will be able to get vaccinated soon, paving the way for family cruises over the holidays.

"There will still be enough time that parents will be able to book their winter vacations with us," he told the industry outlet. "The timing works out perfect for Christmas and New Year, but even if people miss that window, because they're not right there at the front of the line -- you have Spring Break, Presidents' Day, weeks in March. Those are great opportunities for people to bring families on board."

On Sunday, September 26, the Norwegian Breakaway sailed into New York's Manhattan Cruise Terminal ready to set out on weeklong trips to Bermuda through October 31, including overnight stays on the island, according to Norwegian. Sommer called the sailing a "significant milestone."

"We have a 30-year history of cruising from New York and were the first to sail from the destination year-round. Our return feels like a homecoming," Sommer said in a statement. "This fall, as New York comes back to life after more than a year, with Broadway and other top attractions opening back up, we are honored to be part of its story and to provide travelers easy access to a safe and exceptional warm-weather vacation experience from one of the top cruise destinations on the East Coast."

The Norwegian Breakaway is the sixth Norwegian ship to redeploy since cruising restarted around the world, with each ship operating between 50% and 60% capacity on a "fairly regular basis." Of all the cruises being offered, Sommer told Cruise Critic that sailings to Alaska seem to be among the most popular — not least of all because he said Americans are "by far... the largest source market to come back to cruising."

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16 European Airliners To Refund Passengers For COVID-19 Cancelled Flights

By Marine Strauss, Reuters, September 30, 2021

https://globalnews.ca/news/8233851/16-european-airlines-refund-passengers-COVID-19-cancelled-flights/

A group of European airlines agreed on Thursday, September 30 to refund passengers whose flights were cancelled during the COVID-19 pandemic, and committed to provide better information on passengers' rights in future.

After talks with the European Commission, 16 airlines agreed to clear refund backlogs, to better inform travellers when companies would cancel flights, and to offer vouchers only when passengers choose them.

The airlines included Air France-KLM, British Airways, Easyjet, Lufthansa, Ryanair, TAP, and Wizz Air among others.

"In the early phase of the pandemic, some airlines pushed vouchers on passengers," Didier Reynders, European commissioner for justice, said in a statement. "They were acting against EU consumer protection rules. That was unacceptable," he said.

National authorities in individual EU states are responsible for the enforcement of EU consumer protection laws. The EU law, the Consumer Protection Co-operation Regulation, has created a network of state enforcers to co-ordinate on such issues.

The EU Commission said this was the biggest Consumer Protection Co-operation action in the CPC network's history and the first action that was based on an alert from the Commission.

"Airlines have breached European consumer rights on a massive scale during the pandemic," Monique Goyens, general director of the European Consumer Organisation CEUC, which led the complaint to the EU in July 2020, said in an emailed statement.

"It's time for airlines to clean up their act … Many consumers across Europe are still waiting for their money back, for flights cancelled during the first lockdowns in 2020."

EU transport chief Adina Valean also welcomed the agreement, adding that it will restore trust between passengers and airlines. "The recovery of the air transport sector depends on this," she said.

United Airlines Firing About 600 Employees For Refusing To Comply With COVID-19 Vaccination Requirement

By Coral Murphy Marcos, The New York Times, September 29, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/international-business/us-business/article-united-airlines-firing-about-600-employees-for-refusing-to-comply-with/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Market%20Update&utm_content=2021-9-29_11&utm_term=&utm_campaign=newsletter&cu_id=Ts6FwhWx6n2rSHC0x7MiReEeeFJOJkTbUnited

United Airlines is terminating about 600 employees for refusing to comply with its vaccination requirement, the company said in a memo sent to staff on Tuesday, September 28.

"This was an incredibly difficult decision but keeping our team safe has always been our first priority," the airline said in the memo.

The company said on Wednesday, September 29 that it had already begun its termination process for its U.S.-based employees. Workers losing their jobs because of non-compliance with the mandate make up less than 1 per cent of the airline's work force.

"We will work with folks if during that process they decide to get vaccinated," said a spokeswoman at United Airlines, which did not give a timeline for the termination process.

In early August, the airline announced that all employees would be required to provide proof of vaccination within five weeks of a vaccine's full approval by the Food and Drug Administration or by October 25, whichever came first. The FDA in late August granted full approval to Pfizer-BioNTech's coronavirus vaccine for people 16 and older. United had also said it would fire employees who did not follow the new policy.

Other airlines have taken different measures to encourage employees to get inoculated. Delta Air Lines announced last month that it was adding a $200 monthly surcharge on its health care plan for employees who were not vaccinated. The company has also said that it requires new employees to be vaccinated, but that existing employees are exempt.

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(416) 494-9224 (416) 967-6320
info@cafii.com www.cafii.com

Toronto Pearson Ranks Near Bottom Among Major North American Airports In J.D. Power Survey

By The Canadian Press, September 22, 2021

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-toronto-pearson-ranks-near-bottom-among-major-north-american-airports/

Toronto Pearson International Airport has ranked near the bottom among major North American flight hubs in J.D. Power's latest customer satisfaction ranking.

The 2021 study released on Wednesday, September 22 ranked Pearson second-lowest among the 20 airports in the 'mega' category, which see at least 33 million passengers a year.

Michael Taylor, head of travel intelligence at J.D. Power, says Pearson specifically fared relatively poorly because of facilities and pandemic policies.

"A lot of it had to do with COVID-19 procedures, and really some of the terminal facilities could be upgraded."

He said wait times, baggage delays, and issues around the number of people allowed in the terminal because of the pandemic all contributed to the relatively low ranking.

"It's been a tough year," Mr. Taylor said. "There's been a tremendous amount of operational challenges based on COVID-19 procedures at Toronto."

Pearson's rating of 780 points out of a possible 1,000 was below the record high average of 798 points, though it marked an improvement from Pearson's score last year of 763 points.

The airport, managed by the Greater Toronto Airports Authority, has been warning throughout the pandemic of increased wait times because of the need for extra screenings and inspections. The GTAA did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the survey results.

J.D. Power says customer ratings were generally higher in the first half of the August 2020, to July 2021 study period but slipped in the second half as passenger volumes and expectations rose.

The consumer insights firm says labour shortages contributed to lower scores for food, beverage, and retail services among airports.

Pearson has seen its passenger numbers plummet during the pandemic. In the second quarter of last year, it had only half a million passengers, compared with 12.8 million in the same period in 2019, while the second quarter this year saw about a million people pass through its terminals.

While Pearson scored low in the J.D. Power study, earlier this year the Airports Council International awarded it the best large airport in North America for the fourth year in a row.

Blackrock Requires Over Half Its Workers Return To Office In November

By Niket Nishant, Reuters, September 30, 2021

https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/blackrock-requires-over-half-its-workers-return-office-nov-1-memo-2021-09-30/

BlackRock Inc. will require more than half of its employees to work from the office for three days a week on average starting in November, according to an internal memo seen by Reuters on Thursday, September 30.

Some businesses may require employees to be in the office more frequently, the memo from Chief Operating Officer Rob Goldstein and Global Head of Human Resources Manish Mehta said.

The world's largest asset manager will also allow staff to work flexible hours with approval from their managers, according to the memo.

The new directives, which will apply to locations across the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, are part of BlackRock's "Future of Work" pilot program. It will be implemented in select locations that meet certain conditions, including not requiring split operations and masks at desks.

The company also reiterated that all individuals entering its U.S. offices will need to be fully vaccinated, and all employees and contractual workers will be required to be tested once a week.

Employers Navigating New Policies Around Vaccination Status, Travel Rules: HR Expert

Employers Can't Ban Employees From The Workplace If They Are Unvaccinated And Travel, However, Employers Can Ask For Advance Notice Of Travel Plans And Require Employees To Follow Government Guidelines On Travel Such As Quarantine Upon Their Return

By: James Sebastian-Scott, Kitchener Today, August 26, 2021

https://www.kitchenertoday.com/jobs-of-the-future/employers-navigating-new-policies-around-vaccination-status-travel-rules-hr-expert-4256380

More and more companies have begun outlining mandatory vaccine policies as they consider returning employees to the workplace.

But what about if employees want to travel abroad and go back to the workplace the next day after returning from the trip and haven't been vaccinated?

Andrew Caldwell is an HR advisory team lead at Peninsula Canada and he said the biggest thing about the pandemic for HR departments are the announcements from the government that don't exactly give all the details until a few days later.

"These announcements from the governments saying 'hey, we are going to do this' but then no details or information about how it's going to be interpreted and how it's going to be rolled out so you get this big rolling announcement but with no details until a couple of days later."

Caldwell said that despite the frustration of these announcements from the governments, companies can't tell employees where they can go on vacation.

"The employer can try, but it's not really going to hold up," he said, "you can't really tell your employees what they can and cannot do off of company time."

The employer, however, can tell employees to follow restrictions when they get back from a vacation.

"If the employee tells the employer where they are going, 'thanks for sharing the information, here's what the employer can do', he said; "the employer can tell them the guidelines but the employee is not required to communicate where they are going on their vacation to their employer," he said.

The information that is provided by the employee is what the employer can act on.

Caldwell adds that with current federal government restrictions, fully vaccinated travelers are now exempt from quarantine upon their return and the day-8 testing requirement.

"If you've been fully vaccinated, you can travel and come back and not quarantine even if you have contracted COVID-19," he said. "if you have not been fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated, or haven't received one shot of the vaccine yet, you're required to quarantine anyway, so your employer can say 'sorry you can't come in, you must follow the government mandate quarantine."

Caldwell said the interesting debate for staff who have to quarantine in terms of paid time off is that you have to take into consideration the quarantine time if you're required to do so.

"The employee knew what would happen if they had to go and therefore they took on the risk of having to quarantine," he said; "if they can work from home then great, but they chose to go on that vacation and potentially have to take that unpaid time off of work."

He mentions that it's just another step in the process that employees have to consider before booking their next vacation.

Caldwell said that the post-pandemic world is an ever-changing one when it comes to employers' workplace policies.

"There could be an announcement that comes out tomorrow that says all employers are required to have a mandatory vaccination policy but right now it's only a select few in Ontario," he said, "some employers and small- to medium-sized employers can try to mandate a mandatory vaccine policy but that's not a mandate to be vaccinated; that's just saying you have to have a policy in place, meaning you're either fully vaccinated, you have a reason not to be vaccinated, or you're open to being tested continually or taking an education course. You can't mandate employees to be vaccinated as of yet."

He mentions that it's great for small- to medium-sized businesses to have a policy in place to identify what they'll do about vaccines and how you will treat employees who may have chosen not to get it at this time for various reasons; and to update their records without breaching their personal medical information and privacy.

Caldwell said that some hospitals and big banks have said if employees choose not to be vaccinated, then they will be terminated.

"That doesn't mean they will be terminated for cause," he said; "they may be let go from their employment and then paid out, but it's hard to say that you can terminate someone for cause because they haven't been vaccinated," he said.

Caldwell said that there is still lots to play out, but he is waiting on how employment lawyers and courts are going to treat it.

"Right now, it's being based on interpretations on what the government has said."

Widespread Labour Shortage Not Going Away Anytime Soon: BDC Report

The Pandemic Made An Existing Problem Worse, Economist Says

By Amanda Stephenson, Canadian Press, September 29, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/research-and-markets/widespread-labour-shortage-not-going-away-anytime-soon-bdc-report/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN

Nikita George was a fine arts grad looking for a job in the music industry when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

With concert venues shut down and music schools closed, the Calgary woman quickly realized she had two choices — sit home and wait for things to improve, or set out on a completely new path.

She chose the latter, enrolling in a six-month rapid-training program offered by Calgary tech training non-profit InceptionU. Last week, George started her new job as a full stack developer for Acuspire, a Calgary tech start-up.

"At first I was a little bit scared, because it's a big jump from music and teaching to tech," George said. "I thought about just waiting (for the pandemic to end), but then I thought maybe I should take advantage of this. Use the pandemic to learn something, develop a new skill, so that there are other opportunities I could go for."

Much has been written in recent months about Canadian employers struggling with labour shortages 18 months into the COVID-19 pandemic. A report released on Wednesday, September 29 provides additional evidence, with more than 60% of Canadian businesses saying that widespread labour shortages are limiting their growth.

The report, produced by the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), combines the findings of two surveys — one that polled 1,251 Canadian entrepreneurs in May 2021 and a survey of 3,000 Canadian employees conducted in June 2021. Its findings suggest 49% of business owners have had to delay or have been unable to deliver orders to clients due to a lack of labour.

It also says many small- and medium-sized business owners report job vacancies sitting empty for three or four months at a time, with 61% saying they've had to increase their own hours or their employees' work hours as a result.

"It's very serious, because it's slowing down the growth of many businesses in Canada, and as a result is going to slow down the growth of the economy," said Pierre Cleroux, BDC's chief economist.

However, the report also pokes holes in some of the established narratives we've heard so far about the labour shortage. Contrary to popular opinion, Cleroux said, the pandemic didn't create Canada's labour shortage — it just made an existing problem worse. While COVID-19 certainly disrupted the Canadian labour market by temporarily cutting off the flow of immigrants to the country and by prompting some workers to quit rather than risk being exposed to the virus on the job, Cleroux said the key problem is simple demographics.

"Today, 16% of Canadians are over 65. In the next five years, many Canadians are going to retire," Cleroux said. "And not a lot of young people are entering the job market."

Some employers struggling to hire have suggested that the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and other government assistance programs could be making it more attractive for employees to stay at home rather than return to the workforce as the economy opens up. But the BDC report suggests that the phase-out of CERB and programs like it won't fix the problem.

While sectors such as accommodation and food services, retail, and manufacturing have lost thousands of jobs during the pandemic, professional and business services, education, public administration, and health care actually gained workers during the pandemic. In fact, the report says that a full 20% of workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic are now, like Nikita George, working in an entirely different field.

"Now they prefer that job, so they don't go back. That makes the situation worse for some sectors of our economy," Cleroux said. "We want to send a signal to businesses that this is a long-term issue."

Cleroux suggested employers should look to automation and technology to help address workforce challenges, as well as offer a "total compensation package" that includes perks such as benefits, training, and flexibility to help attract applicants.

In a report released in August, the Business Council of Alberta also concluded that pandemic-era support programs such as CERB are not the driving factor behind the labour force shortage. About one-quarter of businesses surveyed by the Council said that income supports are a barrier to finding workers, but only 7% said they are the most significant obstacle.

The group said "increased compensation, more remote work flexibility, improved skills training, and micro-credentialing" may be necessary for employers seeking to attract workers and reduce job turnover.

COVID-19 Pandemic Erodes Sense Of Belonging At Work

By Alain Thériault, Insurance Portal, September 28, 2021

https://insurance-portal.ca/health/pandemic-erodes-sense-of-belonging-at-work/?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=daily_complete_202109-29&utm_medium=email

The number of Canadians who feel a sense of belonging at work has decreased since the pandemic, the August 2021 Mental Health Index released by LifeWorks confirms.

The Mental Health Index finds that the telework model imposed by the pandemic has increased employees' sense of isolation. The key finding from the survey of some 3,000 employees: "One in three Canadians do not feel a sense of belonging or acceptance at work, or are unsure." The results show that 35 per cent of participants expressed this feeling in August 2021, versus 26 per cent before the pandemic.

The Onsite Advantage

Of all participants in the August 2021 survey, 65 per cent said they felt a sense of belonging and acceptance at work. In contrast, 73 per cent expressed the same sentiment prior to the pandemic.

The Index indicates that 68 per cent of those who work at a jobsite feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance at work than those who work from home or in a hybrid workplace.

This trend was found across all age groups. The proportion of employees who report a sense of belonging and acceptance increases with age, the Index underscores.

Loss Of Spontaneity

LifeWorks president and CEO Stephen Liptrap weighed the advantages and disadvantages of remote and hybrid work models. These models are flexible and reduce commuting time, he points out, but weaken people's connection to their organization and colleagues.

How so? "When transitioning to a virtual setting during the pandemic, many employees lost the spontaneity of conversations that they may have found invigorating."

Easing Feelings Of Isolation

Liptrap believes that to help the return-to-work process go smoothly, employers should consider innovative ways to reduce feelings of isolation.

They should also create a bias-free culture regardless of the work location, he adds. "Connections and the social support they offer are important to well-being and we need to ensure that this is not lost," he says.

Among the Mental Health Index sub-scores, employees who work only from home have an isolation score of -9.6, significantly lower than that of employees who work at the jobsite, at -7.3. The isolation score for employees working in a hybrid model is -7.6. A lower score indicates deterioration, and a higher score means improvement.

Best Score Since The Beginning Of The Pandemic

Despite the increased sense of isolation, the overall Mental Health Index average was -9.7. This is its highest point since the index was launched in April 2020.

The 65 per cent of participants who felt a sense of belonging and acceptance at work in the past month had the highest mental health score (-3.1) and the best isolation score (-3.4) compared with participants who were unsure or did not feel the same way.

At Least One Day Of Presenteeism Per Week

The Mental Health Index also found problems with presenteeism. Fifty-four percent of survey participants worked even though they were feeling either physically or psychologically unwell. They reported doing so at least one day a week.

This phenomenon is more prevalent among families: 64 per cent of parents work at least one day a week when feeling unwell, versus 53 per cent of non-parents.

Respondents who do not engage in presenteeism report higher mental health scores. Thus, participants who never work when they are feeling unwell have the highest mental health score, +3.7. They make up 46 per cent of the sample.

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Office Vacancies At Highest Level Since 1994 Amid New Supply, Pandemic Concerns

The National Office Vacancy Rate Hit 15.7% This Quarter

By Ian Bickis, The Canadian Press, September 23, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/research-and-markets/office-vacancies-at-highest-level-since-1994-amid-new-supply-pandemic-concerns/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-morning

Office vacancies in Canada were at the highest level in decades this quarter as new supply continued to come onto the market while the fourth wave of COVID-19 slowed an expected return to work, according to the latest report from CBRE Group Inc.

The commercial real estate firm said on Thursday, September 23 that the national office vacancy rate hit 15.7% in the quarter that runs to the end of September, up from 15.3% last quarter, for the highest level since 1994.

“We were really hoping to see a greater sense of normalcy in September, and unfortunately that has simply been delayed or deferred,” said Paul Morassutti, vice-chair of CBRE in Canada.

He said the market is showing signs of resiliency despite the pressures, noting that prices have remained fairly stable thanks to institutional owners who are willing to wait out a temporary dip.

“I think everyone has to stop clutching at pearls, take a deep breath, and realize that the office market isn’t going away.”

He said there are also fewer companies looking to sublet space as they anticipate a potential return to work, while many companies are putting off decisions about how much space they need until their lease is up for renewal.

“What we’re finding from tenants right now is for the most part, nobody is doing anything dramatic, they are focused first on a back-to-work program and what that may look like,” said Morassutti.

While most companies haven’t made firm decisions on how working from home will play into future office demand, he said the uncertainty around it is probably the major reason institutions haven’t bought any office buildings in Canada over the last couple of years.

The office market will also have to see increased demand to absorb all the supply coming to market, which was spurred by low vacancy rates before the pandemic and difficult to stop once construction is underway.

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There was about 1.6 million square metres (17.3 million square feet) of office space under construction in the third quarter, on top of the roughly 7 million square metres (75.5 million square feet) of direct and sublet space already available, with more than half of the construction concentrated in downtown Toronto.

Morassutti said technology companies will be key to creating that demand.

"I think you're going to see technology demand continue to be a huge driver of new office space, which is why I don't believe the remote working issue is as dramatic an issue as others would have you believe."

He said that already there aren't many options for companies that want large spaces, while the downtown Toronto vacancy rate actually ticked down 10 basis points to 9.9% in the quarter.

Combining that with the suburban market, Toronto's vacancy rate was 13.7% in the quarter, while Vancouver's was 7.4%. Montreal was 14.7%, and Calgary, where oil and gas companies have been paring back for years, was 30.1%.

The story is quite different on the industrial front, where vacancies are low as demand for distribution and logistics space remains at an all-time high.

CBRE says the national vacancy rate for industrial space was at 2% in the quarter, while several markets including Vancouver, London, the Waterloo Region, and Toronto have availability rates of less than 1%.

The sector is constrained from building because of a shortage of land and difficult zoning laws and Canada could start to see multi-storey warehouse space to help fill the gap, said Morassutti.

OTHER CAFII MEMBER-RELEVANT NEWS/ISSUES

Pandemic No Longer Insurers' Greatest Concern

By Alexandre Rajbhandari, Bloomberg News, September 29, 2021

https://www.insurancebusinessmag.com/ca/business-news/pandemic-no-longer-insurers-greatest-concern-311630.aspx?utm_source=GA&utm_medium=20210929&utm_campaign=IBCW-MorningBriefing-20210929&utm_content=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8&tu=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8

Climate change has returned to the top of the list of insurers' biggest concerns as the vaccine roll-out and gradual lifting of health restrictions see pandemic fears ease in many countries.

Global warming was ranked as the biggest risk to society over the next five to 10 years in a report released on Tuesday, September 28 by French insurance giant AXA SA. While that also topped the ranking in 2018 and 2019, it was outstripped by diseases and pandemics last year as the virus spread across the globe.

"Climate change is back at the top of the agenda," AXA Chief Executive Officer Thomas Buberl said in a statement. "This is good news, since last year we feared that the explosion of health risks may overshadow the climate emergency."

Insurers are being increasingly challenged by global warming as extreme weather events wrought by climate change are expected to keep rising. Just under a fifth of the 3,500 insurance professionals polled across 60 countries expressed faith in public authorities to mitigate the crisis.

The survey also found that cyber risks, which ranked second on the list, was a fast-growing fear for insurers. This year, some 61% of respondents put cybersecurity among their top five concerns, up from 54% in 2018. The pandemic dropped to third place.

"The pandemic and the lockdown have certainly accentuated the use of digital tools, and we insurers have seen that it has also intensified cyber risks and attacks," AXA Deputy CEO Frederic de Courtois said at a press briefing with reporters.

IBAC Launches New TV Ad Highlighting The Role Of Insurance Brokers

By Mark Rosanes, Insurance Business Canada, September 29, 2021

https://www.insurancebusinessmag.com/ca/news/broker-leadership/ibac-launches-tv-ad-highlighting-the-role-of-insurance-brokers-311636.aspx?utm_source=GA&utm_medium=20210929&utm_campaign=IBCW-MorningBriefing-20210929&utm_content=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8&tu=9B8F63D4-69B1-4D0C-AE64-59C8BBAFABC8

The Insurance Brokers Association of Canada (IBAC) has launched a television commercial highlighting the importance of getting the right coverage advice for Canadian families and businesses.

The new commercial, entitled 'The Broker Benefit', brings a fresh and humorous approach to informing the public about insurance brokers' role in helping them secure the proper coverage and services.

It is now running on both English and French channels, with the spots appearing on news and current affairs programming, and sporting events, including Canadian NHL, NBA games of the Toronto Raptors, and MLB games of the Toronto Blue Jays.

The TV ad, which was developed under the creative direction of Agency 59, will also be accompanied by a digital marketing campaign.

"The Broker Benefit takes a light-hearted look at the problems that can arise when Canadians don't have expert insurance advice," said Peter Braid, chief executive officer of IBAC. "We believe that IBAC's bold new direction will increase public awareness of the advantages of using a broker to ensure proper coverage and peace of mind."

"We had a lot of fun creating and shooting this," added Brian Howlett, chief compliance officer at Agency59. "Hats off to the performers – and to our client for believing in the power of television to inform by entertaining."

Canada's Warming May Hurt Access To Insurance: DBRS

By James Langton, Investment Executive, September 24, 2021

https://www.canadianunderwriter.ca/insurance/canadas-warming-may-hurt-access-to-insurance-dbrs-1004212829/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newcom&utm_campaign=CanadianUnderwriterDaily&utm_content=20210924152315

An increase in extreme weather events may threaten the availability of property insurance in Canada, warns DBRS Morningstar in a new report.

The rating agency said that Canadian property and casualty (P&C) insurers have, so far, proven resilient in the face of rising weather-related losses.

"However, as climate risk increases and severe weather events become more correlated around the world, insurance and reinsurance companies may opt to withdraw property insurance coverage in regions they deem too costly to insure, or they may avoid insuring certain risks altogether," the report warned.

The report noted that average annual weather-related losses are rising more quickly in Canada than in the rest of the world.

"This is consistent with the notion that the warming of Canada's climate is happening at about twice the rate of the global average, according to scientific evidence provided by the Canadian government," DBRS Morningstar said.

"With the increase in temperature comes climate change — changes in rainfall patterns and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather-related events such as floods, droughts, heat waves, wildfires, and storms and the resulting higher insured losses," the report noted.

Ultimately, these events may make acquiring insurance tougher.

"Under an extreme scenario, global reinsurance companies may reduce their appetite for insuring some property risks in Canada, creating additional challenges for primary insurance companies that rely on reinsurance as a risk management strategy," said Nadja Dreff, senior vice-president, insurance with DBRS Morningstar, in a release.

"As such, we are closely monitoring the consequences of climate change and the P&C insurance industry's response as part of our credit rating analysis," she added.

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'Developers Are The New Bankers': Wells Fargo Analysts Predict Wave Of Job Cuts

By Jennifer Surane, Bloomberg News, September 28, 2021

https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/-developers-are-the-new-bankers-mayo-predicts-wave-of-job-cuts

The era of bankers dominating banking is over as software developers rise -- and a record wave of job cuts will soon sweep the industry.

That's according to Wells Fargo & Co. analysts led by Mike Mayo, who estimated that the technology improvements and automation these developers bring will allow the industry to cut 100,000 jobs over the next five years.

"New job additions could lower reduction levels, but our conclusion is still that this will be the biggest reduction in U.S. bank headcount in history," Mayo, along with six other senior equity analysts, said in a note to clients on Monday, September 27.

Banks spend more on technology than any other industry and had to set aside a whopping $200 billion for information technology last year alone. That's meant that the technologists they hire play an increasingly important role inside the world's largest financial institutions, the Wells Fargo analysts found.

Many of the job cuts will hit lower-paid roles. The financial services industry -- which operates some of the world's largest call centres -- will likely "aggressively" reduce headcount in such locations, the analysts said. Branch workforces may drop 20% over the next several years, and could account for as much as one-third of banks' total reduction.

Software developers wield greater influence over lenders' purchasing decisions and budgets because their tools are ever increasing, the analysts found. That means banks are looking to add technologists and front-line employees to help manage their apps and websites as consumers rapidly adapted to new finance tools during the pandemic.

"Developers are the new bankers," Mayo and the analysts said in the 110 page report. "These tend to be higher-paying positions, so it may be the case that while banks reduce headcount, they don't lower compensation as quickly."

Lenders have had trouble improving back-office functions, the analysts found. That's partly because banks are deliberately cautious when upgrading those systems and they face extra regulatory oversight when doing so.

"Progress in the back office remains a slog," Mayo and the analysts said in the report, noting such employees currently account for about half of all bank employees. "Some will succumb to technology, but others may require changes in regulation or laws to be fully eliminated. In any event, banks should be able to significantly cut back-office headcount over time."

Banks have spent years promising that the extra spending on technology would ultimately help drive down costs. While it might be bad for job prospects, it's finally poised to help profitability, the Wells Fargo analysts found.

If interest rates normalize over the next five years, that would shave more than 9 percentage points from the industry's efficiency ratio -- a measure of profitability that represents how much it costs to produce a dollar of revenue, Wells Fargo found.

"We believe tech requires banks to better compete, enables the biggest structural change in history, and puts record efficiency within reach," the analysts said.

Ex-OSC Chief Maureen Jensen To Helm OBSI

Jensen Joined OBSI's Board And Is Tapped To Be The Next Chair

By James Langton, Investment Executive, September 23, 2021

https://www.investmentexecutive.com/news/from-the-regulators/ex-osc-chief-maureen-jensen-to-helm-obsi/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=nl&utm_content=investmentexecutive&utm_campaign=INT-EN-morning

Former head of the Ontario Securities Commission (OSC) Maureen Jensen has been named to the board of the Ombudsman for Banking Services and Investments (OBSI), and is set to become its next chair.

The industry dispute resolution service appointed Jensen, who stepped down from her position as OSC chair and CEO last year, to its board effective immediately. She'll be nominated as OBSI's next chair when current chair Jim Emmerton's term ends in March 2022.

"As a supporter of OBSI dating back to my years of leadership at the OSC, I look forward to working with the board and OBSI stakeholders to support OBSI's public interest mandate and its ongoing efforts to inspire confidence in Canada's financial services system," said Jensen, in a release.

As head of the OSC, Jensen championed investor protection. She is now joining OBSI amid increasing demands for improved consumer protection in the financial sector.

"This is an important time for Canada's financial consumer protection framework and for OBSI," said Emmerton. "The Liberal government committed in its election platform to establish a single banking ombudsman with binding authority to replace the current system where banks can choose the referee for complaints. And Canadian securities regulators are working with OBSI to establish binding authority for investor complaints."

Jensen has plenty of experience in the regulatory realm. Prior to heading the OSC, she was the commission's executive director and chief administrative officer. She also worked at the Investment Industry Regulatory Organization of Canada (IIROC) and one of its predecessors, Market Regulation Services Inc.

"I am delighted to be able to welcome such a strong and effective leader to OBSI to help shepherd the organization through the years to come," Emmerton said.

RESEARCH/THOUGHT LEADERSHIP/TECHNOLOGY/DIGITIZATION NEWS

The Digital World In Insurance: Gazelles And Laggards

By Kate McCaffery, Insurance Portal, September 24, 2021

https://portail-assurance.ca/societe/lunivers-numerique-en-assurance-les-gazelles-et-les-trainards/?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=daily_complete_202109-24&utm_medium=email

A new study conducted by Celent and commissioned by Equisoft reveals that 91% of insurers surveyed prioritize the use of data and analytical technologies to make informed pricing decisions. Building actuarial pricing models is the activity where they find that data produced the most value for their organization.

These are some of the findings from the survey of IT directors and other senior executives of medium and large North American companies. They work in individual life insurance, annuities, and group insurance.

In a statement announcing publication of the report, Celent researchers indicated that "higher customer expectations for the digital experience are having the effect of segmenting the market between savvy companies and lagging companies." The analysts said that insurers need to focus more on data and leverage digitization, connectivity, analytics, and automation to extract more value from it.

The report, titled Realizing Value from Data: An Insurer's Perspective, found that 73% of insurers prioritize the use of data in areas of customer experience, from service to customers and customer perspectives, while marketing is cited by 64% of the insurers surveyed. Interestingly, 55% of insurers prioritize the use of data for cybersecurity, sales, anti-fraud, and underwriting.

"The promise of gaining a significant competitive advantage by using decades of data to power artificial intelligence and underwriting systems is compelling for insurers," said Brian Carey, senior director, application integration, at Equisoft. "The necessary data migration and the complexity of its integration represent both a risk and a challenge for many companies." The researchers added that many companies face barriers related to their culture.

"Companies have more data than ever before," the report states. "This data comes from digital transformation and integration processes, as well as interfaces with various sources of data, analyses, solutions, and innovations […]. Increasing the value of these new assets is the key to sustainable competitiveness. "

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How Can Insurance Protect The Customers Who Need It Most?

By Bernhard Klein Wassink, EY Global Insurance Practice, September 30, 2021

https://www.dig-in.com/opinion/ey-survey-insurance-financial-wellbeing-and-protections?position=editorial_1&campaignname=V2_DIG_Daily_Briefing_20210316-09302021&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=V2_DIG_Daily_Briefing_20210316%2B%E2%80%98-%E2%80%99%2B09%2F30%2F2021&bt_ee=K2aeIkLhCy%2Bl%2B%2BJD1zFpAYnJzdXHWdbHsdDGdVn3ruvrK%2Fqm9tY5cUhp7dYZrfFD&bt_ts=1633006880884

For consumers, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the equivalent of a massive life event. Its broad-based and multi-dimensional effects were felt psychologically, emotionally, and economically. The profound financial impacts forced people around the world to reassess their priorities, goals, and needs — indeed their entire lifestyles in some cases.

Widespread health concerns, pervasive economic uncertainties, and strict lockdowns bound people around the world into a shared experience of unprecedented scale. But while anxiety and psychological effects were felt universally, it truly has been a tale of two pandemics, financially speaking.

Consumers in emerging markets were hit harder than those in mature economies, both in terms of their health and finances. They faced more severe consequences such as job loss, reduction in working schedules, and the need to dip into savings. Younger generations were more heavily impacted financially, while older citizens faced a greater mortality risk. Of course, many of these initial effects are still lingering as the virus persists.

Recent EY research confirms how the pandemic fundamentally changed consumer needs, how they plan to increase their financial security, and what insurers can do to seize the opportunity. Conducted between May and August 2021, EY surveyed 4,200 people in seven countries (Brazil, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the Philippines, South Africa and the US) about the pandemic's financial impacts, respondents' plans going forward, their interest in different types of insurance products, and their buying preferences (see full methodology).

We also spoke to people in cities across the world to get their perspective.

The results of our research reveal consumers' interest in new products, with strong value propositions and specific features, and an openness to interact and buy in new ways. Insurers will need to engage consumers with empathy, develop solutions that strengthen financial well-being, innovate their product sets, and optimize digital distribution channels. Ultimately, insurers must live their purpose of providing protection to those who need it most, with an eye toward bridging the protection gap.

The Four Key Findings From The EY 2021 Global Insurance Consumer Survey:

1. The pandemic caused almost universal anxiety, which has prompted consumers to take action, and increased their interest in new protections.

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2. Beyond the shared psychological impacts, emerging markets and younger generations took the biggest financial hit and show the greatest interest in new products.

3. Emerging market consumers are digitally savvy, open to sharing data, and ready to buy new products in new ways.

4. Because corporate social responsibility matters to consumers, insurers need to stand behind great values as well as great products.

The threats of the COVID-19 pandemic were felt quite close to home. Losing a loved one earlier than expected was the top concern for consumers worldwide, with 76% of overall respondents citing concern. Clearly, this was more than an economic crisis, though the financial stakes were high too. Financial well-being was the second-highest concern, cited by 73% of all respondents.

Consumers around the world also have much in common in terms of their reaction to the pandemic. Three out of four (75%) anticipate making financial preparations in response to the pandemic. Specifically:

- 50% plan to save more
- 30% plan to develop emergency plans
- 23% plan to speak with a financial advisor

The implication is clear: nobody wants to be caught out like this again. Recovery and preparation for another crisis are the immediate priorities, rather than retirement or estate planning.

Significant percentages of respondents are interested in new types of insurance products. They expressed the greatest interest in policies that pay for hospitalization expenses (94% in emerging markets and 64% in developed markets are interested), followed by an add-on feature for life insurance that allows access to funds in case of emergencies (91% in emerging markets and 56% in developed markets are interested). They are also thinking about short-term income protection products, such as insurance that funds college education plans or pays for credit card bills in the case of a job loss.

Compared to a similar study EY conducted in mid-2020, these findings show a remarkable consistency. Despite the hopeful signs in the late spring and early summer of 2021, financial worries do not look likely to abate anytime soon. Consumers are keenly interested in avoiding what we call “long financial COVID-19,” a sustained state of financial anxiety due to overall uncertainty and a sense of not being prepared for another highly disruptive event.

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UPCOMING WEBINARS AND EVENTS

Web Seminar – Torys LLP: Exploring Open Banking

Date: October 5, 2021
Time: 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. EDT

The much-anticipated final report of the Open Banking Advisory Committee was released in August. Join Torys lawyers Brigitte Goulard, Joel Ramsey, Marissa Daniels and Ronak Shah as they discuss the key aspects of the report, implications for banks, fintechs and ultimately the consumer. Our panelists will also examine the impact of open banking in other jurisdictions and the lessons learned for the future of open banking in Canada.

Register Here

Web Seminar: Future of Predictive Analytics And Innovation

Date: October 20, 2021
Time: 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. EST

Recent years have seen more life insurers investing in predictive analytics programs that have already become a business imperative for property & casualty insurers around the world. Demand continues to grow as life insurers seek new solutions to enhance business performance, improve customer experiences, gain competitive advantage and meet regulatory requirements.

During the webinar, presenters will share insights on these topics:

- The impact of predictive analytics on business results
- Key applications — today and in the future
- Types of data being leveraged for predictive analytics
- Types of technology being used
- How analytics work is completed

Register Here

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Web Seminar - BDO: Innovation In Action

Date: October 20, 2021
Time: 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. EDT

Consumer expectations, regulatory requirements, and rapidly shifting market conditions are driving significant innovation in the insurance sector. The financial needs of insurers are rapidly changing. The Office of Finance will play a pivotal role in shaping the Insurer of tomorrow and predictive planning is a key element in the journey. Many insurers hit barriers with manual, time consuming planning processes that only leverage historical data. Insurers are shifting the lens from hindsight to foresight leveraging predictive planning and AI.

Join BDO to see how a predictive planning program embraces the potential of your Data and AI. In the session, we will cover:

- Technology trends in financial planning and analysis for Insurers
- Best practices in leveraging financial planning Technologies
- Incorporating the World of AI for predictive planning and decision support
- Roundtable with our financial planning experts
- Tips to launching a successful predictive planning program

Register Here

Web Seminar: Canada Sales Congress 2021 – Tools of the Trade

Date: October 20 & 21, 2021
Time: 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. EDT

The 2021 Canada Sales Congress (CSC) will be a virtual two-day television event featuring compelling presentations by some of the industry's best – to help you be your best. It will be an educational and motivating experience for life insurance and financial advisors across Canada

This year's Canada Sales Congress theme is "Tools of the Trade", which are all of those skills, techniques, strategies, programs, and ideas that help us to help more and sell more. These are the practical tactics that anyone can implement and use to build their business. Key focuses of the CSC include:

- How to profit from strategic alliances
- How to use compliance as an advantage
- High performance business models
- How to effectively use sales technology

Register Here

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The Osgoode Certificate in Regulatory Compliance and Legal Risk Management for Financial Institutions

Dates: January 27, February 10 & 24, March 10 & 31, 2022
Time: 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. EST

This event for financial services features live access to interact with and learn from regulators, industry leaders and peers. Get crucial updates, insights and strategic guidance for navigating key legal and operational risks impacting compliance professionals.

Key focuses include:

- Critical updates for financial institutions and views into regulators' pipelines of priorities, current and anticipated
- Top tips on managing data, privacy and technology
- Practical guidance to navigate the 'fair treatment of customers' and escalating demands for ethics and integrity
- Strategies to manage changes to regulatory frameworks and supervision

Register Here