

Blue Water Bridge DF says the next step is essential to its survival



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As of Tuesday, November 30, the federal government of Canada has lifted the PCR test requirement for fully vaccinated travelers returning to Canada following trips less than 72 hours. Ahead of the restriction lifting, *Global Travel Retail Magazine* connected with Peter Brain, Business Manager at Blue Water Bridge Duty Free, to discuss the change in policy.

Expecting a favorable outcome for the Canadian land border duty free industry, Brain says the elimination of the PCR test requirement will help to alleviate the “complicated and expensive” testing process, which served as a significant deterrent to land border travel between Canada and the US. This is especially true of short trips, since a PCR test could be as high as \$150 (CDN) per person – a considerable additional travel expense for individuals and/or groups. With many Canadians having longstanding local and/or regional travel and shopping patterns that involve crossing the land border, he says lifting the restriction is vital to the success of the shop.

Following the re-opening of the Canada border to fully vaccinated Americans in late summer, FDFA released a survey in October that showed despite Americans being permitted to cross the Canada/US land border, Canadian duty free shops – down more than 80% in sales compared to pre-pandemic – continued to struggle with the PCR test requirement in place. Although the first phase of the re-opening resulted in a slight increase in traffic at Blue Water Bridge, Brain states the shop was still tempered by this obstacle, as well as the testing requirements required of Americans to visit Canada.

In preparation of the restriction lifting, Blue Water Bridge employed additional staff to handle the expected growth in traffic. However, as the shop attempts to re-stock, Tania Lee, Vice President, Blue Water Bridge Duty Free, and who is responsible for buying, is continuing to face a long list of supply chain issues.

“Current supply chain conditions and uncertainties about COVID make buying a challenge; however, travel by land vs. travel by air is more favorable given ongoing concerns about new variants. Traveling by car is more comfortable than by air because of greater familiarity of local and/or regional land border destinations vs. distant travel destinations that require boarding a plane,” notes Brain.

When asked how he’d like the federal government to continue navigating the pandemic with the travel and tourism industry in mind, Brain says at this stage, he expects the government to implement more sophisticated infection monitoring and tracking practices that will allow for more fine-tuned actions to deal with COVID. With these in place, the country should not require any further restrictions or complicated practices to travel by fully vaccinated individuals.

“The federal government has been very conservative in its response to managing the re-opening of the border, despite evidence that shows allowing more open travel by fully vaccinated individuals does not present material added risk to the general public.

“The tourism sector of both Canada and the US is suffering from the long closure and the land border duty free industry has clearly noted to the government that the relaxing of border travel requirements is not only warranted at this stage, but also essential for the survival and recovery of many tourism-related businesses including duty free,” adds Brain.

Although there will undoubtedly be hesitation to travel among some people because of COVID – and the growing spread of the Omicron variant – Brain points out that this policy change will readily welcome visitors who are vaccinated and feel safe about traveling again.