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Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon



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• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 29 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. Pursuant to the order of reference of May 26, 2020, the committee is resuming its briefing on the Canadian response to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. At the bottom of your screen, you have the choice of floor, English or French. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need to also switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, except during questions. The questioners will indicate to whom a given question is directed. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair, and that when you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I'd like to welcome our first panel of witnesses.

We have, from Transport Canada, Mr. Kevin Brosseau, assistant deputy minister, safety and security; Mr. Lawrence Hanson, assistant deputy minister, policy; Ms. Wendy Nixon, director general, aviation security; and, Mr. Nicholas Robinson, director general, civil aviation.

We will go now to statements from the panel.

Transport Canada, you have a 10-minute statement. Please go ahead.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau (Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee for inviting us here today.

I'd like to begin by recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented global crisis that is significantly impacting all aspects of the Canadian transportation industry—travellers, shippers and our economy. During these times, Transport Canada's highest priority is the safety and security of Canadians and the

transportation system. This means protecting passenger and crew health and safety as well as ensuring the continued flow of the food and supplies that Canadians need to remain healthy.

That is why, since the earliest stages of the pandemic, Transport Canada has worked hard to introduce a range of layered measures, guidance and requirements to ensure that transportation operations remain safe for workers and passengers. The department's work is informed by the latest science and data as well as the guidance of public health officials and agencies. The Minister of Transport has also exercised his authority to enact measures under several pieces of legislation, including the Canada Marine Act, the Aeronautics Act and the Canada Shipping Act, in the face of this extraordinary situation.

I would like to outline some of the actions taken to date.

The close confines of cruise ships were identified early on as high-risk for spread of the disease. On March 13 the minister announced that the Government of Canada intended to postpone the start of the cruise ship season until at least the end of October. In addition, he also prohibited all Canadian Arctic stops for the entire season.

Even as the government restricted non-essential travel, we worked to help keep the air and marine sectors moving safely and to ensure that supply chains were not disrupted. That is why the government announced, on March 16 and 17, general extensions for some marine personnel certificates and aviation medical certificates.

On March 17 the minister also issued an interim order requiring Canadian air operators to conduct a health check of all air passengers travelling to Canada from international locations. Operators must now deny boarding to any traveller with COVID-19 symptoms, regardless of citizenship. That same day, the minister waived the requirement for ferry operators to make passengers leave their vehicles while on board during the crisis. In the interest of promoting physical distancing, passengers are now allowed to remain in their cars as long as operators put extra safety precautions in place.

Since March 18, all international flights have been directed to only four Canadian airports— Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver—to consolidate available resources for checking international passengers.

On March 19 the Minister of Transport issued an exemption for marine crews entering Canada, deeming them essential. This exemption ensures that food, medicine and other essential products continue to arrive safely at our ports.

On March 21 the Prime Minister announced that the Government of Canada was working with Canadian airlines and foreign governments to provide access to commercial flights for thousands of Canadian travellers who wanted to return home and were faced with challenging circumstances abroad. We also worked with Canadian airlines to ensure that stranded Canadians were offered a reasonable commercial price for return tickets home.

In late March the Minister of Transport took a further step to contain the spread of the virus by requiring all air operators and intercity passenger rail companies to conduct a health check of travellers. They must perform this check on travellers before they board a flight or intercity train in Canada and deny boarding to those with visible signs of the illness.

In early April Transport Canada introduced guidelines to help keep commercial vehicle drivers safe as they carry out their essential work. The department worked with other federal departments, industry representatives and unions to develop the guidelines. A few days later, the department issued guidance allowing commercial drivers to move freely across provincial and territorial borders.

On April 5 several mandatory requirements for commercial marine vessels carrying more than 12 passengers were introduced. Among other changes, these operators were prohibited from engaging in non-essential activities, such as tourism or recreation, and these measures were updated at the end of May. The minister also prohibited Canadian cruise ships from mooring, navigating or transiting in Canadian Arctic waters. Any foreign passenger vessel wishing to enter Canadian Arctic waters must first obtain permission and agree to conditions to protect marine personnel and local communities.

Under these changes, ferries and other essential passenger vessels can continue to operate, but at half their maximum capacity, or introduce other practices that align with Public Health Agency of Canada guidelines to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19.

- (1205)

This could include keeping people in their vehicles, when feasible, or enhanced cleaning and hygiene measures.

In addition, to better protect employees and passengers, Transport Canada issued guidelines to ferry operators similar to those for air and intercity rail passengers. Ferry operators must now screen passengers for signs of COVID-19 before boarding, and deny boarding to anybody showing signs of the illness.

As I mentioned, the safety and security of Canadians and the transportation system remain our top priority. That's why, effective April 20, it was announced that all air travellers must wear a non-medical mask or face covering over their mouth and nose when going through security, when boarding and when on the plane when physical distancing guidelines cannot be maintained. Air passengers on flights to or from Canadian airports must show that they have the necessary non-medical mask or face covering at boarding

or they will not be allowed to board the plane. In addition, we have encouraged anyone travelling by train, boat, bus or ferry to also wear face coverings whenever possible.

Furthermore, the operators of ferries and essential passenger vessels now provide public messaging to travellers about the need for a face covering during their journey. The messaging stresses the need for passengers to use them to cover their mouth and nose when they cannot maintain physical distance from others.

In May, the Minister of Transport extended the prohibition of cruise ships with overnight accommodations for more than 100 people until October 31, 2020. Those with no overnight accommodations, and those that carry fewer than 100 people overnight, are deferred until at least July 1 of this year.

Earlier this month, the minister announced the expansion of the requirements for the use of face coverings for workers and others involved in the transportation sector. Also, as of the end of June, air operators will be required to conduct temperature screenings at the point of departure for all passengers on international flights entering Canada. This will apply regardless of a passenger's point of origin.

By the end of July, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority will also be responsible for screening passengers' temperatures as part of the departure procedures for domestic, transborder and international flights. It will also check the temperatures of airport and aviation personnel before they enter the restricted areas of airports, to help maintain a healthy and safe space for travellers and workers alike.

We acknowledge that the transportation system is vital for the restart of our economy and for our quality of life. It is vital for our safety and security. As the situation continues to evolve, Transport Canada is working closely with other levels of government and with senior transportation sector representatives to tailor our approach to protecting Canadians. We communicate daily with representatives from across federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, from the private sector and labour organizations and from indigenous communities.

On behalf of Transport Canada, I'd like to take a moment to recognize and thank workers across the transportation sector. In the face of challenges, they are keeping people and goods moving, ensuring that our country remains safe for all of us. Transport Canada employees, such as on-the-ground inspectors and many others, are so very critical for getting supplies to people and sustaining the Canadian economy. We appreciate all of their efforts as they continue to work with us and for Canadians.

My colleagues and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brosseau.

Now we will start our rounds of questions. We will do two rounds of questioning, starting with Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Doherty, please go ahead. You have six minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests for being here today. Wherever possible, please keep your answers brief, as we have a lot of questions to go through. I do appreciate you all being here today.

Mr. Brosseau, in Canada's early response to the COVID pandemic, how reliant was Canada on the advice, recommendation or direction from the World Health Organization?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Canada relied significantly on advice from a number of organizations, including the International Civil Aviation Organization and others. The WHO no doubt factored prominently into our conversations with the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Mr. Todd Doherty: In the advisory issued on January 24, the WHO advised countries to implement temperature screening at first ports of entry and focus on early screening at first ports of entry. They said, "The risk of importation of the disease may be reduced if temperature screening" is implemented at the first port of entry and is "associated with early detection of symptomatic passengers and their referral for medical follow up."

Why is it, then, that Canada refused to actually implement temperature screening at this point and waited months to implement that emergency measure?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, that question also would be, I think, relevant to the Public Health Agency of Canada. As the science and the evidence evolved over time, we believed that taking the measure when we did was appropriate for the aviation sector at that time.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, through you, would Mr. Brosseau be able to table with this committee at his earliest convenience any science or relevant reports that show that temperature screening was effective and when Transport Canada received that?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

Mr. Brosseau, looking back, would you agree that our borders should have been closed earlier than March 18? Yes or no.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: My personal opinion, Mr. Chair, is less relevant. I'm not responsible for opening or closing the borders.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Given the knowledge that we had at that time, countries that were closer to the epicentre of the disease—South Korea, Japan, Taiwan—took more extreme measures in the month of January and subsequently have weathered the COVID storm better than Canada. Would you not agree with me that if Canada had taken more extreme measures at that time, Canada may have fared better?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Transport Canada, Mr. Chair, took a number of measures. I outlined a number of them in terms of the border. I would suggest that question be better directed to another government department.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, Conservatives have raised the issue of temperature checks at airports numerous times. Until recently, the Liberals dismissed our concerns. They insisted they supported the science. On June 12, Transport Canada totally reversed its position. It will now implement temperature screening at the airports. Not only that, but it has asked front-line personnel throughout our aviation sector to all don masks. At any point has the Government of Canada provided this PPE or any of the medical devices, testing devices, for aviation partners?

• (1215)

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, personal protective equipment has been provided across various sectors when companies have requested it. In terms of the other devices, Mr. Chair, I don't believe that's the case, but let me turn it over to any of my colleagues who may have a more precise answer, if that's okay.

The Chair: Go ahead.

There seems to be no response.

Mr. Todd Doherty: All right, we'll go on to the next question.

Mr. Chair, through you to Mr. Brosseau and anybody on the panel who wants to chime in, last week the minister appeared at transport committee. Our colleague asked the question, "Minister, would I be more or less likely to acquire COVID-19 at Pearson airport or Union Station, in your opinion?" The minister then went on to say, in his opinion, that the whole process of flying, from arriving at and going through the airport, checking in, boarding the flight and then picking up the bags, was a greater risk to the public than travelling through Union Station.

Mr. Brosseau, does the department share the minister's opinion on that?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, I don't have the minister's direct quote, but let me say that it's important to note that the aviation industry is already heavily regulated in Canada to ensure the strongest safety measures have been put in in order to protect travelling Canadians. We've put in additional measures. Many I've identified, including pre-boarding health checks and visual inspections of passengers for symptoms. The industry has also taken significant action as well. The measures are aligned with international advice and practices that have been recommended as the pandemic has evolved, including the recommendations by the WHO and the International Civil Aviation Organization. The measures in place offer comparable or better protection to doing any other activity outside of the home. I think the risk is diminished with air travel, as adhering to these measures is compulsory.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to Mr. Fisher for six minutes.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the officials here from Transport Canada today.

Can anyone on the panel tell me how your department has engaged with the airline industry on the restrictions and the guidelines the department has put out?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, I'll start with that answer, and then any of my colleagues may wish to provide additional information.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have made stakeholder engagement a critical component of our response strategy. Along with the minister, Transport Canada officials have made this a number one priority to ensure we are hearing directly from those in the industry and those who are most impacted by this pandemic. In doing so, we have created a robust engagement strategy that is connected with all parts of the industry.

I'll speak to a few of them for a second. We have created a forum of senior officials from major airlines and major airports to discuss the most pressing concerns related to the restart of the industry. We have co-chaired an air consultative committee that includes members from the federal government, major industry associations including the National Airlines Council of Canada, the Air Transport Association of Canada, the Northern Air Transport Association and a variety of operators, and by operators, I mean airlines and airports.

This group has been examining various aspects of the aviation industry that we need to make changes to or improve to ensure the restart of the industry is as safe as possible.

We have used our existing regulatory forums like the Canadian aviation regulation advisory council, or CARAC, to distribute almost daily messages on the actions that Transport Canada has taken to support the industry. This council has an open membership including many industry associations and a variety of operators and unions representing aviation workers. We have also established several special COVID consultative mechanisms that have been stood up to engage industry in response to COVID-19. They cover a full

range of operators, both domestic and foreign airlines, and airports and unions representing the aviation workers, for example, flight attendants, pilots and CATSA screeners. All these engagements with the industry partners take place on a weekly basis right now, but we were meeting more frequently at the beginning of this crisis. They have been instrumental in the development of a dozen or so measures we have put in place in the air sector to ensure it can operate safely.

The minister and Transport Canada are also continuing extensive bilateral engagement on an ongoing basis with key aviation partners in all regions in Canada.

This work has been essential to ensure the actions that have been taken to assist the industry as well as hear directly from stakeholders on the ongoing and emerging challenges of the pandemic.

● (1220)

Mr. Darren Fisher: We talk about how COVID-19 has been evolving, and the knowledge of how it's been evolving.

What do we now know about the role of air travel in spreading COVID?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, we know that aviation networks can play a role in the global importation of emerging infectious diseases. For the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, 24 countries had officially reported cases by the first week of February 2020. The first cases in these countries all had travel history. With this information, Transport Canada has worked with the aviation industry to implement one of the strongest public health and safety responses to COVID-19 in the global aviation industry.

It's important to note that this industry is already heavily regulated in Canada to ensure the strongest safety measures to protect travelling Canadians.

And as I've mentioned, we have put additional measures in place, including pre-boarding health checks and visual inspection. We were the first country to make face coverings mandatory in the aviation industry through regulation. We are also implementing temperature screening for outbound and inbound passengers in Canada.

We continue to work with the industry to implement additional measures to reduce the risk of the Canadian aviation industry becoming a vector for the virus.

Mr. Darren Fisher: You talked about data and science in your opening remarks. How have the things Transport Canada has done been based on science and data?

We hear an awful lot of people talk about this country or this state did this or that. How much of your response is based on what other countries may or may not do?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I would say that the global best practices that are under way have a significant impact on shaping our Canadian response. For the aviation sector in particular, the best practices that have been identified through either the European Union Aviation Safety Agency or the International Civil Aviation Organization have played a significant role in creating a baseline through which our measures can be assessed and implemented.

Mr. Darren Fisher: What's the status of train travel right now for passengers in Canada? I guess that would depend on a lot of the provincial regulations, province to province.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Intercity rail passengers are governed by Transport Canada. VIA Rail just announced that passengers will be wearing masks. We also put in mandatory health checks. Questions are being asked of all rail passengers before they take a train within Canada. That was put in some time ago to ensure that no one who exhibited the symptoms of COVID was permitted to travel.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you.

The Chair: We will go now to Mr. Thériault.

[Translation]

Mr. Thériault, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is about air transportation. The United States and the vast majority of European countries have taken steps to force the hand of the airlines. The government's financial assistance for the pandemic period is conditional on a guarantee that travellers will be refunded. Air France and KLM announced on May 15 that their customers would be refunded.

The minister came to the defence of the airlines by claiming that, if they had to pay back their customers, they would not survive the crisis because they do not have the financial means to do so.

Why not force the airlines to refund their customers before they receive federal support?

• (1225)

[English]

Mr. Lawrence Hanson (Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Department of Transport): With regard to the voucher policies in the United States and Europe, both the United States Department of Transportation and the European Commission had indicated that airlines would be absolutely required to provide refunds. I will say that our understanding, to date at least, is that this has not been fully enforced in the United States, and that although the European Commission took the position it did, a number of key European Union members are not requiring, at least to this point, their carriers to actually provide refunds.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Do you feel this would actually cause a financial issue for carriers like Air Canada and Air Transat?

We know that Air Canada was withholding \$2.6 billion in pre-paid passenger revenue and that Air Transat was withholding \$8.9 million in customer deposits and deferred revenue.

Why not require them to refund travellers before they can get financial support?

[English]

Mr. Lawrence Hanson: I will note that our sense of the economic situation of the airlines is that it could be significantly problematic for them to provide refunds at this time. It's important to note, I think, that they have not really been obtaining any revenues for some period of time now.

Obviously, the immediate forward picture also does not look particularly great for airlines to increase revenues. To suddenly require paying out the refunds all at once, which would be in the billions of dollars, could have very significant economic consequences for airlines. It would obviously vary among the airlines...and given the amount of outstanding vouchers that they do have, but we do believe the economic consequences could be serious indeed.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Hanson, were you given access to the accounting records of these companies to confirm that you have a fair and accurate idea of the impact this could have on them? Also, what about the impact on consumers, who do not have \$2.6 billion in their pockets?

That money does not belong to Air Canada. It belongs to the consumers who have not received service. Do you agree with me?

[English]

Mr. Lawrence Hanson: I would be clear from the outset that I absolutely understand and I in no way mean to diminish the materiality of this for individual Canadians who have booked travel that they cannot use right now or be refunded for.

I would say in terms of airlines and their economic impact that obviously the airlines themselves have been clear, up to a certain point, about the economic impact on their companies. You can see it by the cutbacks that have happened and so forth. Beyond that, obviously, I wouldn't be in a position to speak to anything that is commercial confidential information from the airlines.

Lastly, I think it's probably worth noting that under existing legislative authorities, were it even desirous to do so, it is not something where the government could just go in and legally demand that refunds be provided based on existing authorities. The existing airline tariffs never contemplated an event of this kind. Our air regulations, our passenger regulations, are premised on the idea of airlines being responsible for helping people to complete their journey, which is impossible right now, obviously, so the refund provisions were ultimately dependent on the individual tariffs—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Hanson, did you require the airlines to give you access to their financial data so that you could see the big picture, or did you take what they told you at face value?

Would you agree to have them file their accounting records with the Auditor General?

• (1230)

[English]

Mr. Lawrence Hanson: I can't speak to being able to legally require private companies to provide their books. I would say—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: When a country provides financial support, it must be able to require things in return.

Why are we not requiring anything? We accept that \$2.6 billion in consumers' money is being withheld. Some of them will only go on one trip in their entire life, and they are being told it will happen at some point in the next two years. We do not even know how long the pandemic will last for those travellers.

Why will you not pay them back? That money does not belong to the company. Do you agree with me? It belongs to the consumers, not the airline.

[English]

Mr. Lawrence Hanson: Chair, one thing to note to date is to know that for the assistance the member speaks of—for example, the large employer emergency facility financing—there is an application process for that. That process obviously is conducted on a commercial confidential basis. There is at present no requirement that airlines undertake a specific activity related to the refunds in order to be eligible for that facility.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Davies, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Given that COVID-19 cases are spiking right now and growing by 5% or more in 27 states across the United States, including Arizona, California, Texas and Florida, why isn't the federal government collecting data on COVID-19 in the trucking industry?

Mr. Brosseau.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I'll say that we work very closely with the Canadian transportation association and other trucking organizations to be able to do what we can to ensure that truckers, the essential workers who are carrying goods across borders, are in fact kept safe. In fact, that work includes regular conversations with them associated with what issues they are facing, including being exposed to COVID-19.

Mr. Don Davies: I understand. That sounds like you're doing it on an anecdotal basis.

Would you not agree with me, given that our long-haul truck drivers are crossing the United States, which has the largest number of COVID-19 cases in the world and growing, that it might be a good idea for our border officials to be gathering data in a systematic way on where these truckers are going, who they're being exposed to and perhaps to have some sort of organized testing pro-

gram? Would that not be a logical program for Transport Canada to put in place?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Again, Mr. Chair, I think with the constant dialogue that we have with truckers, whether it's border agencies that carry out that work, I would leave that question to the CBSA, but we definitely have that ongoing work. We also work closely with provinces and territories to gather data and populate the national collision database, for example. I think that's an important piece to identify as well.

Mr. Don Davies: Fair enough.

Moving to the airline industry, how many individuals with confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been identified as having travelled on Canadian flights to date?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: For the answer to that question, Mr. Chair, I'm going to turn to one of my colleagues, if that's okay. Mr. Robinson or Ms. Nixon may know the answer to that question.

The Chair: Certainly. Go ahead.

Ms. Wendy Nixon (Director General, Aviation Security, Department of Transport): The number of active cases is actually tracked by the Public Health Agency as part of the tracking that CBSA does at border crossings, so as people arrive and depart, we do get notified. It's not a significant number in recent weeks because of the travel volumes being so diminished, but they are the ones who track that. I'd be happy to follow up afterward with some additional information on the number of cases.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Ms. Nixon.

Mr. Brosseau, are rail passengers required to wear non-medical masks or face coverings?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: They are not required, Mr. Chair, to wear masks at this time.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I will note, Mr. Chair, just for additional context, that masks are requested to be worn in the measures we took where physical distancing is simply not possible or not practical. In the passenger rail sector—and really, that's VIA, for all intents and purposes—the volumes have been such that physical distancing has been largely possible.

Mr. Don Davies: Fair enough.

Turning to physical distancing, according to a June 16, 2020, article on CTV News, a passenger on a recent Flair Airlines flight from Calgary to Vancouver photographed a completely packed aircraft with nearly all of the middle seats in the three-seat rows in the image occupied. They shared that picture. The CEO of Flair Airlines said that the passengers on the aircraft chose not to pay a premium to leave the seat next to them unoccupied.

Transport Canada then issued a statement that said it “encourages air operators to keep an additional space between passengers when seats are available and when safe to do so.” You recommended that “air operators should develop guidance for spacing passengers aboard aircraft”. Why aren't airlines required to leave space between passengers aboard aircraft in order to maintain physical distancing? Why are you allowing airlines to put passengers within the six-foot barrier that public health officers are telling us must be maintained to stay safe?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I'll start an answer and then turn it over to one of my colleagues, who have been working very closely with this sector on exactly these types of issues.

I'll say that it's clearly recognized that on an airplane physical distancing is a challenge. Consequently, that's why we put measures in place, for instance, such as the questions—the symptomatic screening questions and the observations—as well as the mandatory use of face coverings or face masks on the airplane where that physical distancing isn't possible. We've approached this and provided a layering process and system whereby measures actually build on each other, and there's not one individual measure that stands on its own, but a number of measures that have to work in concert to be able to ensure or minimize the risk of transmission of the virus during flight.

We're currently working with the aviation sector in developing a guidance document that is all-encompassing and that will use, for instance, the International Civil Aviation Organization as a baseline standard for best practices in the aviation sector.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Brosseau, Dr. Tam has stated that masks are no substitute.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Pardon me. I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, I didn't hear you.

The Chair: No worries. That ends round one. We'll start round two at this point with Dr. Kitchen.

Dr. Kitchen, please go ahead. You have five minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everybody, for being here today. It's greatly appreciated.

Mr. Brosseau, thank you very much for your presentation. It has brought some questions to my mind.

You talked about health checks and about observing visible signs of illness. What mandatory steps are you taking at Transport Canada to ensure that people who are taking these health checks are qualified and that the information collected is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and kept private?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I will start off the answer, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague Ms. Nixon.

It's very important that the health checks be overseen by Transport Canada's oversight process. On the privacy of individual passengers, it's crucial that we maintain not only the safety of the en-

tire flying public, but that the privacy of individual passengers is also maintained.

Let me turn it over to my colleague Ms. Nixon, who will be able to provide additional granularity to that question.

Ms. Wendy Nixon: To add to Kevin's response, the set of questions that airlines are asked to rely on is an awareness or communication factor with passengers to promote the fact that they should be looking for COVID symptoms, especially in the early days of travel, to make them understand the three main signs of COVID. This was based on advice from Public Health Agency colleagues as well as our civil aviation medicine group. Those signs were promoted.

We do oversight of those international carriers as well as domestic carriers to ensure that they are keeping that information private. As we move forward with additional measures, including temperature checks, we are verifying that privacy analysis is done and in place as well as gender-based analysis to ensure that any of the measures we take are—

• (1240)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. That leads me to my next question.

The minister stated last week that, with respect to the announcement that passengers' temperatures need to be checked for all flights, CATSA, the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, will be purchasing the temperature scanners and temperature guns. Was this decision made based upon advice from Dr. Tam and PHAC?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: This advice was taken in concert with our engagement with the International Civil Aviation Organization and a number of agencies around the world, including what we had seen from our advice here internally to civil aviation medicine. We work closely with the Public Health Agency of Canada as well.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: What was the total cost of that purchase?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, the temperature thermal screeners, and I'll turn to my colleagues, I don't believe have been purchased yet. In fact, the purchase price will depend on the device being purchased, but they have not been purchased yet, to my knowledge.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: If they haven't been purchased, when I flew from China to Ottawa two or three weeks ago, was that device being used by the airline?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I don't know for certain, Mr. Chair, but it very well could have been used by the airline at that time.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Now that we're talking about thermal scanners, can you tell me the science that suggests the scanner has a high efficiency rate? Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Tam, stated a month ago that doing temperature checks on travellers is not effective at all, yet the Department of Transport has now announced that you are using those temperature checks. What evidence can you tell me that shows it is effective?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I'll say that we believe that temperature screening is one of myriad different measures that can be used and implemented in the aviation sector to ensure we're doing all we can to prevent—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: But it does have multiple false positives and false negatives. If the machine isn't held properly, if it's too close, if it's too far away, if it hasn't been screened, if it hasn't been cleaned, if someone comes in who has been sweating or someone comes in after sitting in an air-conditioned vehicle, we get multiple false positives and false negatives.

Where is the evidence and can you provide that for us?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, I believe it was Mr. Doherty who asked for that information previously, and we undertook to provide that. I'm happy to do that.

Again, I must stress that we see the temperature screen and the proper standard operating procedures for its use as being one measure among many in a multi-layered approach in the aviation sector to prevent ill people from getting on an aircraft or being in an airport.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kitchen.

We go now to Dr. Jaczek.

Dr. Jaczek, please go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Helena Jaczek (Markham—Stouffville, Lib.): Thank you very much to our witnesses from Transport Canada. Certainly, you've outlined clearly the chronology of the measures that you've been taking over time and projecting what you're going to be doing. Obviously, as the situation over COVID-19 has evolved, you've been monitoring very closely and following along, considering what is best in terms of safety.

My first question is for Mr. Brosseau.

In response to Mr. Thériault, you were talking about the assistance that Transport Canada has given the airline industry, but he implied that you've specifically helped out air carriers.

Could you go through exactly what measures you've taken from a financial perspective to keep the airline industry alive?

• (1245)

Mr. Lawrence Hanson: I'll take that question, Chair.

To be clear, Transport Canada itself has not provided any formal financial assistance to Canadian air carriers. The assistance that has come has been within the ambit of larger sector-wide, economy-wide assistance that's been developed, including airlines' access to the emergency wage subsidy, their ability to seek liquidity assistance from the BCAP as well as the large employers emergency financing facility. Transport Canada itself has not provided any direct financial assistance to airlines during the crisis.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you for clarifying that.

I'd like to turn to the health checks and the temperature screening measures that have been undertaken. First of all, what are the results of those health checks? How many passengers have been prohibited from boarding an airplane? I presume that Transport Canada

is keeping an eye on the results of those health checks. Let's just concentrate on those for now.

Perhaps it's Ms. Nixon who might be able to respond.

Ms. Wendy Nixon: Yes.

In fact there's no reporting requirement built into the interim order with respect to the health checks. We have asked air carriers for their numbers, the numbers of people who were turned away based on the questions alone. In fact, some people, a handful of people, were turned away from flights based on the answers they provided. Some of this was because of communication and people not understanding the requirements for transiting or people who were subject to, for example, provincial health orders who were trying to fly home. The numbers have been very small from what we hear from the carriers.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Are you aware of whether the carriers are providing those particular clients any public health recommendations, such as whom to report to or potentially whom to get tested by? Is there any follow-through with these individuals?

Ms. Wendy Nixon: We have provided air operators a significant amount of guidance material, including contact information for provincial health authorities and direction on what to give passengers when they arrive and answer those questions in a way that might indicate they have COVID symptoms or if symptoms are visually observed or if there are other signs to indicate denial of boarding. The airlines are given information on how to treat that passenger.

Transportation from the airport is one of the examples included in our guidance material to air operators.

Ms. Helena Jaczek: Thank you.

Perhaps I could follow up on the direction Mr. Davies was going in with regard to physical distancing. In theory, it would be quite possible, in fact, to distance passengers six feet apart on flights, but clearly there's an economic interest at stake here too.

Mr. Brosseau, could you explain to us the reasoning, with consultation presumably with PHAC, behind how you are not at this point in any way enforcing a physical distance between passengers during flights?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I would say a few things. One, as I mentioned before, there's the work we've done in trying to create a multi-layered system. Two, there's what we've relied on in terms of advice from other aviation authorities as well. Third, our advice and direction and guidance will continue and is continuing to evolve. I can't foreclose, as volumes go up and people start flying again, that this may not be a measure that we take. Right now we believe guidance works very well for the most part, in terms of the broad array of measures we've taken. We'll continue to assess that as we need to.

Again, I think on some aircraft, for instance, the planes that travel to our remote and indigenous communities, it's simply not possible to have physical distancing processes or standards in place.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Jaczek.

Ms. Jansen, please go ahead. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Thank you.

My questions are for you, Mr. Brosseau. If you don't mind, I would like to begin by sharing excerpts from an email I received from a constituent who works at Vancouver airport. I received this email back on January 29. Due to the fact that this particular constituent was concerned that sharing this information with me could put their job at risk, they asked me to keep them anonymous.

Remember that this is from January 29:

MP Jansen, I'm hoping you can urge the government to have a more serious approach by raising the threat level assessment of coronavirus. I'm a screening officer at YVR. Most of the employees in YVR strongly feel we are not prepared to fight or prevent the spread of the virus. Since Health Canada determines the threat is low, there are no face masks provided to the employees. The official language is, "not recommended but respected", towards staff's personal choice to wear the mask. We are only told to wash our hands more than 20 seconds but a lot of passengers and some employees don't wash their hands or the soap runs out during peak hours in some of the popular washrooms. Health Canada ensures the public that a healthy person will be safe from the virus by washing their hands and staying at least two metres away from others.

Currently that's impossible. Our searches do not allow officers to keep two metres distance when conducting searches nor do we have space at checkpoints. I know for a fact that a lot of movement flow from YVR staff and inbound and outbound travellers are mixed together in certain areas. While China has gone so far to lock down cities, and other countries like Britain - they've stopped flights to and from Beijing, it worries me and other YVR staff to see that the Canadian government is taking such an optimistic approach for something so contagious and dangerous. We're concerned and even if we want to help ourselves by wearing our own masks, they're sold out and I've even gotten teased on my own choice of using my own mask by upper management.

That email was sent to me on January 29. We brought these concerns to the health committee immediately, and yet there were extreme delays before any of these concerns were properly addressed.

Mr. Brosseau, why was everyone so scared to take extra precautions? What could possibly have been the harm?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: That's a powerful email. I had similar discussions with my family at the end of January.

We worked very closely with Labour Canada, Health Canada and labour unions to assess, through all those lenses that you've identified, the situation for key transportation workers in Canada. In fact, we've been putting in a number of measures since the end of Jan-

uary, recognizing the evolving nature of the advice as well as the evolving nature of the disease in this country.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: With due respect, I think we need to face the fact that these delays in decisions, allowing people to wear masks or even recommending it, closing the borders, seriously impacted the health of Canadians and the spread of this coronavirus. Had we listened to the concerns regular Canadians like my constituents were raising right at the beginning, we could have fared much better.

Was anyone on your team, you or someone on your team, being pressured to keep employees from using PPE because perhaps supplies were short and our national stockpile was non-existent?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: There was never a situation where any of us felt, or I felt.... I never felt pressured. It was about trying to provide the best advice through task hazard analyses, working with the labour program and with provinces and territories, and ensuring that employees were provided the best personal protective equipment that they would have—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: I have a quick question, then. Would you agree that it was reasonable for employees to be able to wear PPE without fear of discipline by their superior officers?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: That's a difficult question for me to answer. I really don't know what kinds of disciplinary processes an individual employer would have.

• (1255)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: It's even just the mocking. I mean, the poor guy was mocked for wanting to wear a mask to work.

What I'm hoping for is that these employees will actually get an apology for the kinds of pressure and stress they were put under. It was simply for wanting to wear a mask and gloves, which was for their own personal safety. In a free country, they should have been allowed to do that. Obviously, they should have been encouraged as well. Can they expect an apology?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Mr. Chair, I think that question is best directed to the employer of these employees—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: You don't have any connection to the fact that they were being told not to wear masks in general? I understand that was part of the message you were giving them.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: It was generally the case back in January that the guidance and advice was in fact evolving. We were in fact the first country to mandate face coverings throughout the air journey—

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: What date was that?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jansen.

We go now to Mr. Kelloway, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair, and hello to my colleagues.

I want to thank the witnesses. Last week was National Public Service Week, and taking that into account and the work that the witnesses have done, I really want to thank you. My office and I had a lot of questions during this pandemic for Transport Canada, and you've been nothing but helpful during these challenging times.

My question is one that will focus on contrast and compare. I'll utilize myself as an example in that line of questioning.

Before the House adjourned on March 13, I would travel by plane at least once a week from Sydney, Nova Scotia, to Ottawa. Like many things, COVID has made me think twice about the spread of infection, and even when I go to the grocery store I'm thinking about it. When it's safe for us to return to Ottawa—it's more of a futuristic question—how would you compare the risk of travelling by plane to, say, going to the gym or having dinner at a restaurant?

That's open to anyone.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Thank you. I'll start the answer and then I'll turn it over to one of my colleagues who is far more proficient.

I think it's important to note that the aviation industry, as I mentioned before, is heavily regulated in Canada to ensure the strongest safety measures are in place to protect Canadians who are travelling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we've put additional measures in place, including pre-boarding health checks, as we've discussed, and visual inspections of passengers for symptoms. I'm proud to say that we were the first or one of the first countries to make face coverings mandatory through regulation in the aviation industry. The industry as well has taken significant action at airports and with aircraft.

The measures are aligned with international advice and practices that have been recommended as the pandemic has evolved, including the recommendations by the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Let me turn it over to my colleague, Mr. Robinson, who might be able to provide additional colour for you.

Mr. Nicholas Robinson (Director General, Civil Aviation, Department of Transport): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, we've spoken a lot about the measures that Transport Canada has taken and put in place, but we've also worked directly with industry on the many measures they also have put in place.

We see an industry that has had already significantly high standards with regard to grooming or cleaning and disinfection of the aircraft. They have gone much higher and put in additional mea-

asures with regard to grooming and disinfection of aircraft in between segments. They've looked at the filtration on aircraft. Many larger, more advanced commercial aircraft that you see right now have HEPA filters on them. They've used that and improved ways to filter the air in that aircraft more rapidly to further prevent the spread of the virus.

We see airports and air operators putting mechanisms in place to respect that recommendation for physical distancing, to improve their operations and their procedures. So, as you travel to Sydney airport, you see different mechanisms in place. You might see screens in front of your regular check-in operators, more encouragement to check your own bags.

The industry has gone well above any regulations that we have also put in place. We now have an industry that is much healthier than the regular activities you would do day in and day out where those measures aren't mandatory. You don't see mandatory face coverings in a lot of the businesses that you're moving into, but in the air industry you do.

• (1300)

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Do you see these measures that you just mentioned as the new normal, given that we may have a second round of the virus in the fall, and beyond that, who knows? Do you see this as a bit of the new normal?

Mr. Nicholas Robinson: I would say we're constantly monitoring all the measures that we have in place. We've embedded a lot of the regulatory measures, the health check measures, the face covering and temperature screening into what's called an interim order that expires every 14 days. That's why you see our renewing it. It also allows us a rollback mechanism. There is no way we can predict how long these measures will be in place. They'll be in place as long as they are required. We also don't want an industry that has particular measures in place when the risk is no longer there, to put a burden on an industry to not solve a problem.

Right now we have a goal that we want to reduce all risks with regard to the air industry becoming a vector for the virus. That's what we're putting in place. When we evaluate and see that maybe there's a mechanism or measure that we have in place that's no longer required, we'll have a rollback mechanism to remove that.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelloway.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brosseau, in your opinion, what prompted the mayor of Montreal to ask her staff to hand out information and awareness brochures? She even asked them to explain emergency health measures to travellers arriving at the Montreal airport.

Is this overstepping, improvisation or a communication issue with your department?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: Thank you very much for your question.

I am sorry, but I do not know why the mayor made those comments. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for me to answer that question.

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right. The fact remains that she took the lead. In Quebec, we all wondered what right she had to do that, but it was a perfectly legitimate position that has proven to be appropriate over time.

I would like to ask you another question. Do you think that taking passengers' temperature is an appropriate measure?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I found—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brosseau, if you're going to respond in French, could you please switch to the French channel.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You can answer in French or in English, no problem.

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I am Franco-Albertan, so I will try to answer in French, and if I need to switch to English, I will.

I will say that taking temperatures is just one of several steps that help airlines make sure that sick people do not set foot on a plane or in another airport.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That answers my question. In that case, why do Air Canada and WestJet have a protocol in place to take passengers' temperature? Is that the result of discussions you have had with them, or did they do their research on their own?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: We frequently talk to big companies like WestJet and Air Canada about the steps they are taking. We can certainly ask them to put in place certain protocols. So I would say that it is a result of our discussions, and also because they are looking at what other airlines around the world are doing. So they are taking the necessary steps to ensure that Canadians trust them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Brosseau.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Davies, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

• (1305)

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Mr. Brosseau, I want to pick up my questioning by noting that you're allowing air carriers to fill airplanes to full capacity. Dr. Theresa Tam has stated categorically that masks are no substitute for physical distancing. Also, she has never said that physical distancing is required except if it's more profitable not to physically distance. Finally, we're not talking about flights to remote areas. The example I gave you was a flight from Calgary to Vancouver.

Once again, why was Transport Canada allowing air carriers to fill airplanes to capacity when all of our public health guidance has told us that we should not be doing that?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: The public health advice we received is that physical distancing should be maintained whenever possible. We put in place a system of several measures—I'll call it a layered approach—where there's no one single point of failure. That's why we have the questions, the physical observations, the face masks, the configuration of the aircraft in some cases, and the personal protective equipment worn by flight attendants for their interactions with passengers. There are myriad different points to minimize the risk of transmission. It's not one individual measure but a number of them.

Mr. Don Davies: I understand that, Mr. Brosseau, but would you say that it's not possible, then, to physically distance on an aircraft such as the one that travelled from Calgary to Vancouver?

Mr. Kevin Brosseau: I'm not sure what type of aircraft that was, but I can certainly turn to my colleague Mr. Robinson, who might have a better answer for you.

Mr. Don Davies: Well, let me suggest the answer.

The CEO of that airline said he didn't have the middle seats empty because the passengers on the other side didn't pay a premium. Clearly it was possible for them to physically distance, but the CEO of the air carrier simply chose not to allow this because it was less profitable to do so. I'm curious about that.

I'll pivot to a different question—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

The Chair: I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here and sharing with us all of their expertise and for giving us their time. It's much appreciated and very helpful.

With that, we will suspend the meeting as we bring in the second panel.

• (1305) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1325)

The Chair: We will resume the meeting.

Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 29 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. We are working pursuant to the order of reference of May 26, 2020. We are resuming our briefing on the Canadian response to the outbreak of the coronavirus.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, except that, during questioning, the questioners typically indicate to whom they are addressing their questions. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed to the chair. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will need also to switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you're speaking. You want to allow for a short pause when you're switching languages. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I'd like to welcome our second panel of witnesses.

From Air Canada we have Mr. Ferio Pugliese, senior vice-president, Air Canada Express and government relations; and Dr. Jim Chung, chief medical officer.

From Air Transat we have Mr. Howard Liebman, senior director, government and community affairs; and Captain Dave Bourdages, vice-president, in-flight service and customer experience.

From WestJet we have Jared Mikoch-Gerke, manager, aviation and security.

We will start with statements. Each group will have 10 minutes to make a statement.

Air Canada, we will start with you. You have 10 minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese (Senior Vice-President, Air Canada Express and Government Relations, Air Canada): Good afternoon, Chair and members of the standing committee. Thanks for allowing us the opportunity to be here this afternoon with you. Given this is the Standing Committee on Health, I trust everyone is well and safe.

My name is Ferio Pugliese. I am the senior vice-president of government relations and Air Canada Express at Air Canada. I am pleased to join you here to discuss the Canadian response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am joined by my colleague, Dr. Jim Chung, who is Air Canada's chief medical officer. He and I will try to divide our time with opening remarks and then be available to answer your questions.

As we all know, the impact of the pandemic has been unprecedented. Not only has this novel disease negatively affected the

health of individuals, cities and countries, it has also ground economies to a halt, undermined trade relationships, closed borders and reduced passenger travel between countries in a way that many of us never thought possible. At this stage, Air Canada has had a front row seat in all of this.

As Air Canada followed the disease in China in late 2019 and early 2020, we began to see travel demand between the two countries drop significantly. This forced us to cut back service to China at a significant cost. In fact, we were one of the first North American airlines to do so. Continued monitoring of the World Health Organization's daily reports and those of our health partner BlueDot made us realize that the situation was more dire than many cared to admit.

As cases of COVID-19 began to appear outside China and with little information about the nature of the disease, Air Canada's executive team made the decision to cease all operations to China, following a travel advisory issued by the Government of Canada. This took place on January 29, 2020, one full day before the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern, and well before the WHO declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. It's important to note that Chinese carriers continued to operate to Canada during this period.

Over the course of February, we saw air travel demand drop by even larger numbers, with cancellations of existing bookings increasing in lockstep. Our sector was unique in that we were witnessing and feeling the economic impact ahead of almost any other industry or sector, except for maybe hotels and tour operators, and well before the pandemic declaration.

In addition to this fear-induced drop in demand, governments around the world began to impose travel restrictions and border closures that would physically limit travel options. By mid-March, easily one of the busiest air travel periods of the year, our operations were a fraction of what they had been the year prior, and worse, domestic and international advance bookings were almost zero.

Sadly, after 10 years of growth and recognition as one of the best airlines in the world, Air Canada was reduced to 5% of operations year over year, essentially a 95% reduction. As a result, we made the difficult but necessary choice to lay off over 20,000 employees, more than 50% of our workforce, and reduce our global network from 220 destinations to 46.

Given that Canadian border restrictions and quarantine policies remain in place, there is little hope of a near-term recovery, although we are taking steps to rebuild our network and continue to lobby to lift these restrictions.

Even as our day-to-day operations were being scaled back, we took steps to assist in the national effort to combat the crisis by doing what we do best: fly people and cargo. In March and April, in collaboration with Global Affairs Canada, we repatriated more than 300,000 Canadians through our regularly scheduled flights and specially arranged repatriation flights. In total, we operated 21 dedicated repatriation flights. Our crews deserve our thanks.

To quote Minister Champagne, "Air Canada played a vital role in bringing thousands of our fellow Canadians home." I want to thank them on the public record for their tireless effort, compassion, dedication and professionalism during these demanding missions.

In addition to repatriating Canadians, Air Canada took steps to scale our cargo operations and assist in strengthening the supply chain to secure equipment for the health network.

- (1330)

Since the end of March, we have operated more than 1,500 of these cargo-only flights and transported hundreds of tonnes of medical equipment. It is important to note that cargo also plays a critical role in the global economy and our own national economy.

At this stage, Air Canada is in recovery mode. We're learning how to deal with this disease. We are not only taking steps to address COVID-19 concerns, but also working with domestic and international partners to ensure that air travel continues to be a safe alternative for travel. In conjunction with world health organizations and authorities, many countries like France, Germany, Portugal, Japan and Australia are now implementing plans to reopen borders to bring back trade and tourism to their economies.

Air Canada alone contributes \$50 billion to the Canadian economy through these activities, to say nothing of the entities in the supply chain. Canada, we believe, now needs to work with stakeholders to urgently take steps to reopen its borders, ease travel restrictions and quarantine requirements, both domestically and internationally, in a very measured and prudent fashion. Otherwise, our sector and the Canadian economy would suffer far longer than they need to.

I will stop my remarks there and turn the floor over to my colleague, Dr. Jim Chung.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Jim Chung (Chief Medical Officer, Air Canada): Thank you.

Good afternoon, everyone.

[*English*]

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on perhaps the most defining health issue of our lifetime.

As Air Canada's chief medical officer, I oversee all aspects of Air Canada's health policies and from day one have been directly involved with both Air Canada and the International Air Transport Association medical advisory group's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated earlier, Air Canada had an early view into the pandemic and was very concerned with the trajectory of the disease in early January 2020.

This insight was partly due to our partnership with BlueDot. In April 2019, we entered into a partnership with a small Toronto-based artificial intelligence infectious disease analytics and surveillance company, because we recognized the importance of early disease surveillance and the impact it has on the aviation industry. BlueDot assists Air Canada in predicting when and what stations will be affected in any given outbreak, allowing us to plan accordingly with early warning.

With the benefit of this partnership, and in the absence of a single measure that can achieve high levels of risk reduction, Air Canada took the alternative approach of using a combination of biosafety measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, as far as practical, at the earlier stages of the pandemic. In addition to limiting travel to COVID-19 hot spots in those early stages, we focused on our front-line crew and customers. Working with our unions and crew, crew were provided with masks, and our check-in, boarding procedures and on-board service process was redesigned to reduce and minimize interaction with customers in order to reduce risk for both groups.

As the pandemic continued to spread and we realized that this was not a short-term problem, we further redesigned our customer experience to enhance our existing health systems, such as advanced HEPA filters on aircraft, which refresh air every several minutes and capture 99.9% of airborne pathogens.

In consultation with other medical experts, we introduced the Air Canada CleanCare+ program, a first of its kind in the industry and certainly in Canada. This program utilizes electrostatic sprayers; provides customers, in addition to staff, with masks, gloves and hand sanitizer in a kit; scans customers for temperature, a policy that has been recently adopted by the federal government; and further minimizes direct contact between staff and customers during the travel experience.

While no one single measure is a sure way to prevent acquiring COVID-19, the use of multiple layers of these measures certainly does reduce the probability that one might be exposed to the virus during travel.

As the world continues to adjust to the new normal, air carriers are also adopting new measures to ensure that air travel, with its benefits, can once again begin to operate safely and throughout the world. While border restrictions might have assisted efforts in containing the spread early on, both the WHO and PHAC acknowledge that it's not a guaranteed way to eliminate the risk.

Today, with a better understanding of COVID-19, we are able to better manage these risks, and we are seeing countries around the world adopt new measures and reopen their borders. Such emerging technologies include digital contact tracing, which the federal government and Ontario are soon to roll out in the form of an app, digital AI technology capturing contactless vital signs, and expanded and new testing technology. In fact, Air Canada is looking at cutting-edge Canadian technology that can screen customers for COVID-19 at airports and would further reduce the possibility that customers can spread the virus aboard aircraft.

The key to using these technologies is partnership with the federal government. The reality is that COVID-19 will continue to circulate in our communities to some degree and won't be fully controlled until a vaccine is developed and rolled out in mass quantities. I sense that there is a false belief that COVID-19 will be eradicated with current measures. It will not. We can only continue to minimize risk and cases in this environment.

Our goal should be to reopen the economy while putting in place measures to limit the spread and limit outbreaks. We are working to make air travel as safe as it can be in this environment for our customers and staff so that we can welcome Canadians back on our aircraft and help them to do business, visit friends and family and explore the corners of our country and the world.

Thank you.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Chung.

We go now to Air Transat.

Mr. Liebman or Captain Bourdages, please go ahead for 10 minutes.

Mr. Howard Liebman (Senior Director, Government and Community Affairs, Air Transat): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

My name is Howard Liebman. I am the senior director of government and community affairs at Transat, and I represent Air Transat.

With me today to help in answering your questions is Captain Dave Bourdages, vice-president of in-flight service and customer experience at Air Transat. Captain Bourdages is our airline operational lead in dealing with the COVID-19 emergency and recovery efforts.

[*English*]

Transat is a leading integrated international tourism company specializing in holiday travel, founded in 1987. It offers vacation packages, hotel stays and air travel under the Transat and Air Transat brands to some 60 destinations in the Americas and Europe. Transat is firmly committed to sustainable tourism development, as reflected in its multiple corporate responsibility initiatives over the past 12 years, and was the first tour operator to be awarded Travelife certification, in 2018.

Based in Montreal, the company has approximately 5,000 employees, of which a high point of 85% were forced to be laid off as

a result of the crisis. Air Transat is the second-largest operator of international passenger airline services in Canada, with a fleet of 40 large commercial airliners. Our core market and business strategy are based on a point-to-point international flight network, primarily in the leisure travel segment, and that has been decimated by the crisis.

I respectfully remind the honourable members of this committee that air transport is a vital component of our national transportation infrastructure and a locomotive for the Canadian economy. Aviation-enabled travel and tourism facilitate and support over one million jobs in every region of our country, far more than any other industry in the private sector. This critical part of our national economy has suffered the brunt of the economic harm brought on by the pandemic, and without robust government support and a focused strategy for reopening borders, it will suffer irreparable harm. In short, there is no national economic recovery without aviation and tourism actively helping to propel it forward.

I would now like to briefly share with you the details of our company's operational response to COVID-19 and the severe financial stress that the pandemic is placing on our business. I will also outline our plans going forward as we prepare for a safe, smart and measured restart.

With the onset of the pandemic in Canada in mid-March and the swift government pronouncement of international travel restrictions on non-essential travel, travel bans and quarantine measures, complemented by provincial orders closing businesses, Transat moved quickly into a repatriation operation. Air Transat flights operated during the last two weeks of March were mainly intended for the repatriation of Transat customers back to Canada or their country of origin.

While sales and revenues completely collapsed, we operated hundreds of previously scheduled and special flight segments at a cost of tens of millions of dollars, most of them departing Canada empty, ultimately repatriating some 65,000 clients home in a period of just two weeks. We also partnered with Global Affairs to operate six dedicated repatriation charter flights. Additionally, Transat donated supplies of PPE—namely, 44,000 masks and 300,000 pairs of gloves—to the Quebec government on April 2 to assist with the urgent supply needs in our communities at the time.

Unique among today's panel, Transat suspended all of our flights and operations completely as of April 1 in the face of Canadian and worldwide travel restrictions and border closures to non-essential travel, and the resulting unprecedented revenue collapse and ongoing market uncertainty, to preserve our liquidities and protect the long-term viability of our business. Ours is a highly capital- and labour-intensive industry, and our commercial planning and strategy were never intended to deal with such extreme market conditions. We were certainly not alone in this respect.

As a resilient 33-year-old company that has successfully weathered many challenges and storms in the past, we took action. In March, we drew down on a \$50-million revolving credit facility. Senior executives and the board have voluntarily reduced compensation ranging from 10% to 20%. The retirement of all of our Airbus A310 aircraft from our fleet occurred in March.

- (1340)

As mentioned earlier, 85% of our staff had been laid off. However, on April 16, Air Transat took advantage of the emergency wage subsidy, which was extended to all of our laid-off staff. We are actively renegotiating contracts with suppliers and aircraft lessors.

As noted, the travel and tourism industry are most directly and severely impacted by the pandemic. Consequently, the UN World Tourism Organization has issued a call on governments and international organizations to include travel and tourism as a priority in recovery plans. In Canada, leading travel and tourism organizations formed the Canadian travel and tourism round table, now joined by business leaders beyond our industry, which has called on the federal and provincial governments to remove travel restrictions as soon as possible based on established safe restart and recovery protocols.

Indeed, the International Civil Aviation Organization recently published the recommendations of a special state working group, which includes Canada, that would serve as a road map for its 200 member states for the safe restart of air transportation operations worldwide. These include protocols that seek to maximize biosecurity during all aspects of the airport and air travel experience and minimize the risk of further contagion. Captain Bourdages can provide further details, as necessary.

The federal government thereafter established an interdepartmental working group of experts, led by Transport Canada, which is working with industry experts, including Canada's major airlines and airports, to incorporate these recommendations into a national plan. It's imperative that this plan be approved for implementation and that it form the basis of properly risk-managed decisions to be taken regarding the loosening of non-essential travel restrictions and quarantine requirements.

Furthermore, we are fully mindful that numerous regions of the world remain problematic in terms of their infection rate trends, and the restart must not be a facilitator for the import of this contagion into our country. This is why many countries are now actively considering the implementation of safe-to-safe air corridors based on mutually recognized and robust national restart strategies, ideally based on the ICAO harmonized principles.

We strongly urge the federal government to actively pursue a similar strategy and to immediately initiate bilateral discussions to this end with Canada's key travel country partners that have shown sustained improvement in negative infection trends, including the European Union, the U.K., Mexico and other countries of the Caribbean and Latin America that have demonstrated minimal infection rates.

Third, it is essential that consideration by cabinet regarding the removal of non-essential travel restrictions be fully integrated with the lessening of quarantine requirements, especially with safe travel corridor partner countries. Indeed, in the context of restarting and promoting visitor and tourist travel to Canada, it rapidly becomes a moot point if we continue to require self-isolation for discretionary travel. This is a particularly important point for Air Transat, as mentioned at the outset, as a leisure travel operator.

Fourth, leisure travellers will stay home if they do not have access to insurance that could cover COVID-related illness and treatment. Insurance companies in Canada are currently denying such coverage to travellers. Fortunately, it is our understanding from the insurance industry that this can be remedied by reducing or eliminating Canada's level 3 global travel advisory to avoid all non-essential travel, especially with safe corridor countries. We therefore request Global Affairs Canada to actively undertake to review and adjust its advisories accordingly, in conjunction with the above-mentioned safe restart and travel corridor strategies.

Transat is doing its part corporately as well for the health and safety concerns of our customers by creating Traveller Care, a comprehensive end-to-end program featuring enhanced health and safety measures at all points of contact.

On the basis of the above, we have cautiously proceeded to announce the gradual resumption of a small percentage of flight and tour operating activities on July 23, including service to 18 destinations in Europe and the Caribbean as well as domestic services between Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. The success of these operations will be directly dependent on expeditious government action as requested herein, which in turn will allow for even more robust services as we move through the summer and into autumn.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. Captain Bourdages and I look forward to the discussion.

• (1345)

[Translation]

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Liebman.

We will go now to WestJet Airlines.

Mr. Mikoch-Gerke, please go ahead for 10 minutes.

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke (Manager, Aviation Security, WestJet Airlines Ltd.): Good afternoon and thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of this committee, for the invitation to speak with you today.

I'm here today to provide the committee with some details on the operational response to COVID-19 and share with you the safety measures we have implemented for our people and for our guests.

My name is Jared Mikoch-Gerke, and I'm the manager of aviation security for the WestJet group of companies. In my capacity, I serve as a subject matter expert on legislation and regulatory policy across our global network.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating effect on the global aviation sector that no country or carrier has been immune to. Prior to this crisis, WestJet had 14,000 employees operating 700-plus flights carrying roughly 70,000 guests per day throughout our growing international network.

As of today, we've had to park two-thirds of our fleet. Our workforce has been reduced by 9,000, and we are operating about 100 flights a day carrying less than 10% of the number of guests that we normally would have. We haven't flown a scheduled flight to the United States or international locations since March 23. While we believe that we have now entered what we are calling the stability phase of this crisis, we don't anticipate a true recovery to pre-COVID levels until 2022.

Later in my comments, I hope to impart some considerations for the committee on how we can collectively work together on recovery efforts.

What has been highlighted by this crisis, however, is the steadfast reminder that commercial aviation is an essential service and a crucial element of critical infrastructure, which is now more than ever important for the transportation of critical workers and goods. While we are operating a reduced schedule, we have remained committed to serving every market in Canada that we did prior to this crisis, and we have increased our cargo capacity to transport critical medical goods and PPE. Safety above all is paramount to us, and we have been unwavering in our commitment to ensuring the safety of our employees and guests during these challenging times.

We have continuously evolved our response throughout this crisis, and right from the outset we took actions to ensure that our people were protected right across the organization. At our head office here in Calgary, at the beginning of this crisis we seamlessly moved all our employees who are not operationally critical to working remotely. For those who were needed in our office space, we imple-

mented physically spaced workstations and made available hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, gloves and masks for all employees. We further implemented enhanced frequent cleaning of all high-touch points and fogging of our office spaces.

In our operations control centre, we have 24-7 cleaners embedded, who are continually cleaning high-touch areas and providing fresh desks for shift change. For our technical operations team, we've provided them all the necessary PPE, along with half- and full-face respirators. We implemented temperature checks for all personnel, to be recorded on arrival to work, and we require that face masks be worn when unable to socially distance during maintenance tasks. We have increased the sterilization and cleaning of all work areas and touch points.

For our airports and in-flight teams, we provided gloves, masks, disposable gowns, safety glasses, face shields and hand sanitizer. We implemented enhanced surface and lavatory cleaning on board our aircraft, and we have dedicated a lavatory for crew members where possible. We modified our crew accommodations practices and have assigned crew to in-terminal hotels, where possible, to prevent the need for transportation. In airports, we worked closely with our airport partners to ensure enhanced cleaning of any common-use areas, and we have increased our cleaning frequency of major touch-point areas of service.

To date, we have had 29 employees who have tested positive for COVID-19. We are thankful that none had serious health complications and the majority have since recovered completely.

I want to take this opportunity to provide our thanks and give enormous appreciation to all WestJet front-line workers, who have risen to the challenge and continue to provide their exemplary caring, friendly and compassionate guest service in the face of this crisis.

For our guests, we recognized right away that it is critical we make sure they feel safe when travelling with us. Regardless of why our guests are flying, whether it be reporting for work as needed or to be with a sick loved one, we exceeded the health measures recommended and, on our own accord, implemented a very rigorous and consistent approach to their health and safety.

We worked collaboratively with Transport Canada on the quick implementation of all orders in council and emergency orders for the implementation of a health questionnaire and consistent observations of any ill guests and, more recently, the requirement for guests and crew members to wear masks at all times during travel.

• (1350)

In addition to these requirements, we implemented seat blocking to provide social distancing on board our aircraft during the most critical months of this crisis. We enhanced the cleaning of our aircraft to include disinfection of all guest contact surfaces and included electrostatic fogging of every aircraft during overnight stops and on long turns in our hub cities.

We implemented temperature checks for all guests in alignment with the WHO standards and provided them with disinfectant wipes during boarding to allow them to personally wipe down their areas as they chose. We also modified our food and beverage service to reduce touch points by removing service on short flights and providing guests with individually packaged goods on board for longer flights, and we removed all non-essential seatback literature.

Each of our aircraft is equipped with hospital-grade HEPA filters that capture over 99.99% of all contaminants, including coronaviruses, and the cabin air is fully refreshed every six minutes. We truly believe that Canadian aviation has led the way internationally in the implementation of an industry-leading biosecurity plan.

The safety of our guests and employees is without hesitation our top priority. In addition to the physical measures we have taken, we have committed to being open and transparent throughout this rapidly evolving situation. We were the only airline in Canada to publicly share, directly on our website and through our social channels, flights that were identified by the Public Health Agency of Canada as having a positive case on board. We specified the affected rows, which are considered close contact and may be at risk of exposure.

Any aircraft where an individual was identified as displaying symptoms, or that was determined to have had a positive case on board, was removed from service to have a full, detailed cleaning and disinfection, along with replacement of the HEPA filter. There has not been a single case of COVID-19 transmission on board a commercial flight. This is a true testament to the sterile environment on board aircraft and the enhanced disinfection and health measures that have been put in place since this crisis began.

The aviation industry is unbelievably resilient and adaptable. When border closures started to transpire, we were able to quickly stand down and rightsize our business for the incredible downturn that occurred. The restart and recovery, though, is much more complex and has many incumbent challenges. Our first priority was ensuring that we have consistent and scalable health measures in place to ensure the safety of our crew and our guests, which we do. We are fully compliant with the report recommendations of the International Civil Aviation Organization council's aviation recovery task force, or CART.

As we look towards recovery, we require the support of all levels and departments of government to utilize the measures that we have taken as part of a plan to reopen commercial aviation and reinstall consumer confidence. We need to work towards a national strategy and eliminate inconsistent provincial border restrictions to allow for the free movement of Canadians across the country.

We also believe that it is in Canada's interest to develop bilateral or multilateral agreements on sterile corridors and remove quaran-

tine requirements on these routes. These would be routes between international locations that have done an effective job in controlling COVID-19, similar to the discussions occurring on the trans-Tasman bubble between Australia and New Zealand, or what has occurred for travel within the EU.

We are confident that we are well prepared for Canadians to return to travel safely. We are now calling on government to help do so and to develop a scalable plan for reopening. As more important elements, such as effective testing and contact tracing, become available, we stand ready to assist and implement further measures that come with reduced travel restrictions as we all adapt to our new normal.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions and further discussion.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mikoch-Gerke.

We go now to our questions. We will do two rounds of questions, and we will start the first round with Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Doherty, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our colleagues for being here. Having had a 22-year career in aviation, it's always great to talk with fellow aviation geeks. I guess that's what we would call ourselves.

I do want to start by saying that the last few months have been extremely difficult for the airline industry. It has been incredibly difficult for me, as a former aviation executive, to sit and listen to some of the things I've been hearing. Sadly, I get the impression from some of my colleagues that they feel we can just flip a switch and our sector will rebound.

I am heartened to hear the comments such as from Howard, at Air Transat, as well as you, Jared, from WestJet. This is a vital component of our national economy. We need to do everything in our power to start looking now for a plan and to start developing that plan to reopen our doors and our borders and get our planes flying. That starts at the top.

I'm going to direct this question to Dr. Chung. I'm not sure whether you're familiar with it, but last week the minister responded to a question by my colleague: "Minister, would I be more or less likely to acquire coronavirus at Pearson Airport or Union Station, in your opinion?" I'll paraphrase, because the blues don't accurately capture what the minister said, but the video is clear as day.

The minister said that in his opinion the whole airline or aviation experience—from arriving at the airport, to checking in, to boarding the aircraft, to flying and then picking up your luggage—is more dangerous, and that you're more susceptible to contract COVID.

Dr. Chung, would you agree or disagree with that?

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

Dr. Jim Chung: Thank you for your question. I will answer it in English.

[*English*]

What I can say is that we have taken every measure possible to mitigate the risk of acquiring COVID throughout the entire journey. This includes the process of checking through the airport; the wearing of a mask, even at the arrival at the airport; the reduction of personnel allowed into the airport unless they have a verified boarding pass; the separation and proper social distancing within the airport; boarding by zones, from the back to the front; handing out protective gear, including hand sanitizer, wipes and masks; and the mandating of wearing masks throughout the flight.

As my colleagues at WestJet have noted as well, the frequent air exchange is at the hospital OR-level HEPA filtration; and even on arrival, all the sanitation measures are in place. With that cascade or multi-layer risk mitigation, we feel that we have reduced the risk as significantly as possible with respect to the journey.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Earlier in the process, with one stroke of the pen, airline and airport staff were immediately thrust to the front lines of the fight against COVID and its spread.

At any time, were the airlines provided with personal protective equipment and/or temperature screening?

I'll open that up to the three carriers.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: I'm going to ask Jim to comment further on that because he has some insight.

Dr. Jim Chung: Sure.

Could you just clarify that question? Do you mean the provision of PPE for our crew?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes. For front-line airports and air crew, was PPE provided to the airlines at any time by the government?

Dr. Jim Chung: Specifically, did the government provide us with PPE? Is that the question?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Yes.

Dr. Jim Chung: When we noted the outbreak, we quickly implemented measures to protect our own employees and customers. We provided them with personal protective equipment, including facial masks, and adjusted our service specifications and reviewed our check-in procedures and boarding procedures. We introduced new standards for protection and cleaning.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Would you say the government was initially slow to react?

Dr. Jim Chung: It's probably not in my area to comment on that other than to say we were all learning. This was relatively new. There's no manual or playbook for this.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

Could you tell me how many Air Canada employees contracted COVID?

Dr. Jim Chung: For reasons of privacy, we can't really get into numbers. Having said that, consistent with our WestJet colleagues, we thankfully have had no fatalities. The numbers are consistent with the Canadian public at large.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doherty. You have two seconds left, but I'm going to cut you off.

We go now to Dr. Powlowski for six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I love travelling and I trust that in future years I will fly many times with all of your airlines. All of your companies have been extremely responsible corporate citizens, and certainly you all seem to play a role in our national response to the pandemic in repatriating people and transporting essential goods like PPE, and you all ought to be commended for this.

I also want to acknowledge the fact that you're all taking a big financial hit. I know it has been an existential threat to the airline industry, given that we practically have no one flying.

That said, Mr. Pugliese, and I think all of you have said that you have to be prudent as you reopen and start flying again, I'm thinking that we may not want to open all routes as quickly. For some routes like Toronto to Thunder Bay—and I'm the member of Parliament for Thunder Bay—Thunder Bay has very few COVID-19 cases, with maybe two cases a week, whereas metropolitan Toronto obviously has a lot more.

When the airlines were going full bore, about 1,000 people were going in and out between Thunder Bay and Toronto. Even though a lot of people in Thunder Bay have taken a big hit, such as the people who run restaurants, who have had to close down, we haven't had a hit because we haven't had that many cases. If we start opening these routes again, the hospital is potentially suddenly going to face a lot more difficulties, as will the first nations communities further up north, which are at high risk because Thunder Bay is that hub. I'm not sure we want to open Thunder Bay to Toronto.

That said, how about opening more routes between safe destinations? Places like Thunder Bay have pretty low rates; Newfoundland has fairly low rates and Manitoba and B.C. have low rates. There are currently no routes flying, for example, from Thunder Bay to St. John's or Winnipeg to St. John's. I think there was also mention made of international connections between safe destinations.

Is each airline potentially contemplating opening those kinds of routes, establishing new routes, to get going quickly?

• (1405)

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: My airline colleagues, I'll take a stab at that one first and pass it around for others' thoughts.

That's a very good question. I have a few things to say in response. First and foremost, when we refer to prudent and safe measures, it's not just about unlocking the economy and travel without having safe measures in place that do two things in particular. One, first and foremost, is to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the travelling public. We're very good at that. We're in the safety business and the risk management business. That's what we do in aviation, and I would even speak on behalf of many of our tourism colleagues and the work they do. They do the same. Health and safety is priority one, and we need to have measures in place.

The prudent measures then include our adoption of what we know are proven measures around the world today when do open up. We know that elements like PPE; social distancing, where appropriate; thermal scanning, which is now in place in airports with temperature checks; and contact tracing and even testing as technologies start to evolve, these are the things to watch. What health authorities and aviation organizations around the world are adopting for opening their economies, we, too, need to be adapting and adjusting to that in Canada. I would just say that it needs to move at a better pace than it has thus far.

That takes me to the second thing, because there are really five things that happen today that are confusing the level of travel. We have no foreign nationals allowed into the country. We have blanket advisories on avoiding travel at all costs. These have been messages that have been put out. The 14-day quarantine rules apply in some jurisdictions and not others. They apply across Canada, and we're finding that in other parts of the globe, where prudent and where they're seeing curves drop and R factors dropping, these are being lifted. We have closure of air, land, and sea borders. We also have a host of changes and some confusion across the country about what provinces we can travel to. A number of those things need to be fleshed out, but in order to do that, we're suggesting that we would come forward and put together measures, and we have safe measures to allow people to travel and transit through airports and onto the aircraft in a safe fashion.

To your other question, giving thought to and contemplating where to travel, we would be very much in support of saying no. We look at opening up international borders, transborder with the United States, and even within Canada in places we know are low risk. If we were to look at connections around the world, we might look at countries where they've seen a declining curve and where they've taken safe, prudent measures to open their economies. Why not partner with them, and why is Canada not on the list of those countries to reopen?

These are the sorts of measures and our lens as to how we would look at reopening. That's what I mean about measured and prudent.

I'll stop and allow my colleagues to comment.

• (1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Powlowski. Your time's up.

We go now to M. Thériault.

M. Thériault, go ahead for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thériault, you have six minutes.

Mr. Luc Thériault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for your presentations. They have enlightened us about the impact of this crisis on air transportation.

On May 28, the Quebec National Assembly unanimously passed a motion asking the following of the Canadian government:

That the National Assembly ask the Canadian government to order airlines and other carriers under federal jurisdiction to allow customers whose trips were cancelled due to the current pandemic to obtain a refund.

Obviously, that did not convince the federal government.

Were you required to provide written evidence or demonstrate to the government that there would be catastrophic effects if customers who requested a refund were paid back?

[*English*]

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Mr. Chair, we value the feedback we are receiving from all guests and appreciate how difficult this unprecedented situation is for all.

As the CTA noted in the April 22 clarification, airlines tariffs do not always provide for cash refunds, especially in cases beyond our control. WestJet believes refunding with travel credits is an appropriate and responsible approach in extraordinary circumstances such as the COVID-19 crisis.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Where is that money right now? It is understood that the money does not belong to you since no transaction has taken place.

[*English*]

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Maybe I'll underscore the fact that these vouchers that exist are non-refundable vouchers that the customers have purchased. What's important to note is that, and I'll speak on behalf of Air Canada, we've reimbursed over a billion dollars in refundable tickets back to the travelling public. Those reimbursements have been issued.

In addition to that, we've also made modifications post-pandemic to our travel policies whereby we are allowing the vouchers to not expire but also be carried forward, and be transitioned and transferred into Aeroplan equity points. We've done that, and we've made those adjustments retroactive to March.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: I see that our conversation about this will not be a quick one.

You have come to tell us that you want the borders reopened and travel restrictions and quarantine measures relaxed. But we know that 50% of community spread comes from individuals who are not showing, or have yet to show, any symptoms.

You say you can guarantee safe travel, but the mere fact of travelling carries a risk of spread. You say that you can open corridors in countries where infection rates are acceptable or low, but you still need to know whether these countries have adequate detection and screening.

Detection is certainly essential and I will give you an example. At the beginning of the crisis, we focused on mainland China, which had already put measures in place. But many people from Quebec went to Europe and when they came back, Quebec ended up having quite a few more cases than elsewhere in Canada.

So what is your plan and how can you ensure that reopening borders and easing travel restrictions and quarantine measures will still allow us to deal with a second wave of the virus?

• (1415)

[English]

Dr. Jim Chung: These are just my thoughts on that. Firstly, at the initial outbreak of this pandemic, there was not a lot of information, unfortunately. We're learning as we go along, quite frankly. Where we are now with the knowledge of COVID-19, its pathogenesis, essentially its incubation period, the fact that there is a percentage of asymptomatic and presymptomatic carriers and the potential spread are some things that we didn't know early on in January and February.

Having said that, the work for opening up the borders, that's not done by me alone. I would certainly not make that determination. That would be done in consultation. That would be driven by government, participating with all the stakeholders, including the aviation industry and Canadians in general, on determining what those factors are that would minimize the risk as much as possible.

I know that it's not going to be zero, but we need to minimize the risk as much as possible, be that setting up certain measures for the other country in terms of its case rate, its positive infection rate, the number of tests they do per capita, etc. These factors would really have to be worked on and determined, but that would be in collaboration with all stakeholders, including government, the public and the aviation sector.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thériault.

[English]

We'll go now to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Davies, please go ahead, for six minutes.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for taking time out of what I know is a very busy time for you to be with us today.

Recently the CEOs of Air Canada, WestJet and Air Transat signed an open letter to the Prime Minister and the premiers that said, among other things:

The mandatory 14-day quarantine and complete closure of our country to all visitors from abroad is no longer necessary and is out of step with other countries across the globe.

Given that Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, has called the mandatory 14-day quarantine period of all international arrivals "a cornerstone" of federal pandemic policy, I'm just wondering what your response to that would be. Is Dr. Tam wrong?

Any one of the three airlines can answer.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: I'll start, and maybe ask Dr. Chung to comment as well, and others.

I don't suggest it's wrong, but I guess when we look at that, as we assess it, we look at other parts of the world. In fact, even in Canada, you have medical officers and medical directors within provinces who have lifted the 14-day quarantine. This only leads us to preclude that we're probably at a state in time, unless the curve in these various places is still running rampant—and we know that you have—

The Chair: Mr. Pugliese, could you hold up your mike, please, or get closer to the mike?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Unless we know there is a high-risk area. I mean we're seeing parts of the globe on an ongoing basis, and, like you said, even here within Canada, where the 14-day quarantine measures are being lifted.

I'm not here to disagree with Dr. Tam, I'm not a doctor, but there are several doctors and medical practitioners around the world who are making contrary decisions in cases where they're seeing measured approaches to reducing the curve, the contact, and the caseload, and where that happens we should allow it to open.

• (1420)

Mr. Don Davies: If I might ask, where in Canada are we releasing the 14-day quarantine period?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: There are provinces within Canada that don't have a 14-day quarantine period.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

I'm not sure who it was, but someone believed we're entering a "stability phase".

I agree with all of the comments that have been made that we are feeling our way through this pandemic, that there is no guidebook, but I think it's becoming fairly obvious that countries that have seen a reduction in their cases and have relaxed their approaches are starting to see flare-ups. We've seen them in Australia and New Zealand. They are happening in over 25 states in the U.S. It seems possible that when we think we can relax our standards, we may be actually walking into a second phase. Dr. Bonnie Henry of British Columbia has stated repeatedly there has never been a pandemic in history that did not have a second wave.

Given that the airlines are clearly requesting relaxation on a number of fronts, are you not concerned we may be walking into another flare-up, and if so how would you respond to that?

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Mr. Chair, I'll take a stab at that question, and then I'll pass it along to my colleagues as well.

I think collectively, as an industry, our primary objective is to ensure the health and safety of our people and the travelling public. As we've seen, this is a very complicated and evolving crisis and the 14-day quarantine is a challenging component of the industry restart. Going forward, I think what we would be looking for is to continue to seek alignment with standards and guidance from internationally recognized bodies and move towards the easing of restrictions in a prudent and calculated manner.

One of your questions was about how many provinces have eased their 14-day quarantines. Within Canada alone, if we look at provincial restrictions, we have about half of the provinces across Canada that don't have 14-day quarantines for intracountry travel. I think as a first step what we certainly want to look towards is a consistent national strategy on how we open up the country to Canadian travellers. From there I think it will give us a good opportunity to assess what the impact will be. I think we're all highly concerned about a second wave. That's something we're certainly aware of, but we're implementing all of these health measures to try to reduce that as best possible. We just have to have a calculated strategy report.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

If I could just stay with WestJet, you made a reference to your adoption of seat blocking during the critical phase. I take it that was to comply with the guidelines on physical distancing. Are you still seat blocking, and if not, could you provide your rationale for why not, and if you are, why you are continuing to do so?

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: With respect to spacing in the cabin and seat blocking, that was a measure that we undertook of our own accord. It was not because we were regulated to do so or had any means to do so. We did take it as an interim measure. We have always said that it might not be permanent, but in the midst of the crisis, we made the decision to provide some distancing inside the cabin.

As we continue to move through the crisis, we're going to continually look toward the current industry guidance and international guidance, and we will continually review all of our policies, including this one, on a regular basis.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

To Air Canada, at the end of May, you announced that you would no longer use the federal government's emergency wage subsidy and instead opted to lay off about 20,000 staff, including flight attendants, mechanics and customer service agents. Can you explain to us why your airline made that decision?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Yes, I can answer that question.

I just want to clarify as well, with regard to your previous question, that when I mentioned the 14-day quarantine, as Jared mentioned, I was referring to interprovincial travel within Canada.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Can I just clarify that too? I think it's an important point. Are we talking intercountry or intracountry?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: It's intracountry, so travelling province to province, but Canada itself as a whole has a 14-day quarantine—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

• (1425)

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, could the witness just briefly answer the question that I asked him? I think he clarified and he did want to add something to explain why Air Canada made the decision, so I'll ask him for a brief answer to that.

The Chair: Answer very quickly, please.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Yes, I can answer that, and it's not because I didn't want to answer the question. I wanted to clarify your previous question, so hopefully that—

Mr. Don Davies: I realize that.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Thank you.

I think what is important to know is that we still have a thousand people who are on the CEWS program.

As for the CEWS program, we chose to not continue with it because of the shutdown of the borders and the decline in our business. Essentially we're running a 5% business. We can't continue to employ those people for the long term, and the CEWS program on its own does not provide adequate relief overall for us to continue to operate. It's not a free program. There's still an extensive expense and a cash burn that's associated with it, which comes along with payroll taxes, pensions and benefit costs.

In addition to that, because we don't see our business recovering for another three years, it would mean keeping that level of staff on board knowing that we're not going to be in a recovery position to sustain that level of staffing in the near term. Hence, we've kept a thousand on board in anticipation that if the economy does open up and travel restrictions and border restrictions and quarantine measures and so on are eased, by the time we hit the end of this year, we might see ourselves recouping about 25% of our business, which would allow us to take those thousand people and put them back into full-time jobs. Hopefully—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

We go now to our second round with Mr. Jeneroux.

Mr. Jeneroux, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions are for Air Canada to begin with.

Conservatives were pushing for border closure early on for high-risk areas. What influenced Air Canada's decision to start stopping flights as early as January, going against the Canadian government and the WHO's recommendations?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: With respect to January, I would say any decisions that were made early on in the year were largely commercial in nature. I would say the more pointed changes that we experienced would have come in late April and into early May, where we saw the border constraints continuing to be extended, and as a result, we suspended our service because traffic had been down significantly. Canadians are able to fly into the United States, but U.S. passengers are not able to come into Canada, and when they return, both of those are subject to a 14-day quarantine. That had a hugely significant down-draft effect on passenger demand.

When you look at the early part of the year, many of those decisions on the network, if any, would have been commercially related. Later into the second quarter, they were largely COVID-related as a result of border restrictions being imposed.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: You'd agree with me then that, if the Government of Canada had closed the borders at the same time that you stopped taking flights across the border, it would have essentially had a more significant impact on the number of COVID-19 cases. Also, in terms of your competitors, it would have encouraged them to also shut down their flights from other high-risk areas.

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: No, I'm not sure you can conclude that. I wouldn't say that at all. You're drawing a parallel between the traffic going back and forth and—if I'm understanding you correctly—the rate of transmission between the two countries. I don't know if you can draw a parallel to that.

I would just say that the rationale for our cancelling that service certainly had to do with the imposition of border restrictions and travel restrictions.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: It's unfathomable to me that if someone paid for a service but didn't use it, they would still be charged for that service.

Air Canada, WestJet, Air Transat, when will you be reimbursing your customers? We'll start with you, Mr. Liebman.

• (1430)

Mr. Howard Liebman: Thanks for the question.

That was also a question asked of our CEO at our quarterly results announcement last week. I want to say there are a couple of models out there. There's the model of the taxpayer paying or the model of the user paying. So far in Canada we have not followed the EU or the U.S. model, which has pumped tens of billions of dollars into airlines. We are where we are.

I want to say at the outset that we do need help in this regard. We're not operating. There's no business or industry that can go for three months with no revenue, no operation, and meet all of its obligations. I want to say that, in the end, there's a great sensitivity to the fact that we need our clients. We live and die by our clients and if we have gotten this far, it shows how grave the situation is for us and for our industry and that help is needed.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: No one else is quick to jump in.

This goes to Air Canada, WestJet and Air Transat.

Can Air Canada or WestJet...?

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for the question.

Again, as I said earlier, we really do appreciate how difficult this unprecedented situation is for all. We've taken measures to ensure that we're extending our vouchers beyond expiry. Again, the Canadian Transportation Agency, when it clarified its statement on vouchers, noted that airline tariffs do not always provide for cash refunds, especially in cases beyond our control. We do believe—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. There is no interpretation into French at the moment.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. I'll pause your time, Mr. Jeneroux.

Monsieur Mikoch-Gerke, which channel are you on? Are you on the English channel?

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: I am.

The Chair: Okay. Perhaps you can try that again and we can see if the translation is working.

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Certainly. I was just reiterating that the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: We can hear you loud and clear now.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Mikoch-Gerke, please restate your response, if you could.

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Certainly.

I'll just reclarify that on April 22, the Canadian Transportation Agency did clarify its statement on vouchers, noting that airline tariffs do not always provide for cash refunds, especially in cases beyond our control. We do believe that refunding with travel credits is an appropriate and responsible approach in extraordinary circumstances such as this.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jeneroux, you have 10 seconds left. Did you want to ask the third airline for a response?

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: You read my mind, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is there anyone who can respond from the other airline?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Yes, I would just echo my colleagues' responses. Air Canada has complied with the applicable regulations as of April 22 and the CTA statements. I'll also reiterate that for refundable tickets, we issued payment on those as per the tariffs and the regulations to the tune of \$1 billion.

The Chair: Thank you all.

Thank you, Mr. Jeneroux.

We'll go now to Ms. Sidhu.

Ms. Sidhu, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses from the Canadian airline industry. You brought thousands of Canadians home and delivered PPE on cargo flights to Canada during the crisis. I commend your efforts.

The airline industry is interconnected with many other industries. One of them is airport taxis and limo services. In my riding of Brampton South, there are many Pearson Airport taxis, limo drivers and companies such as Aerofleet, AirFlight and Airline Limousine taxi operators who live in my riding. Our front-line taxi drivers were working very hard due to COVID-19 during the health crisis, including some who tragically passed away due to the virus. We know what they and their families are going through, and I know more can be done for them.

My question is to all the witnesses. How are airline companies such as yourselves coordinating with these companies to put in support measures for them as you begin to increase the volume of your services? This question is for all, and we can start with Air Canada.

• (1435)

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Thank you very much to the member for the question.

We really understand the impact on the tertiary businesses. We just recently started a tourism round table, which consists of well over 45 members from the tourism/travel/visitor economy, of which other forms of transportation are a part. In that, our goal is to work collectively on how we will support continuous measures among all of these businesses, because when you look at the impact to the economy overall, these businesses, combined with our businesses here around the table, equate to \$106 billion of economic output to Canada. It's not insignificant, but everybody has to be in lockstep with these measures.

As we start working, we're working with Transport Canada on our own measures within airports and in air transportation within the aircraft itself. We are also working with our counterparts within industry to look at how we support consistent measures, and if those are measures like PPE, sanitation and so on, these are things that we will be partnering with them on.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Does any other person want to respond? Okay.

My next question is this. I understand there's limited space in airports, for example, as reflected in lineups for boarding and to retrieve luggage, which may be a complicating factor in resuming normal air operations, especially in countries that may not have similar regulations to what we do in Canada. Can you elaborate on this issue? How is your company working around this in Canada?

Dr. Jim Chung: Maybe I'll take that question.

We recognize that there are multiple points throughout the travel journey, not only here but internationally, where there may be periods when one is unable to maintain social distancing. That's why there's a multi-layered approach to—

The Chair: Dr. Chung, could you hold up your mike, please?

Dr. Jim Chung: I apologize, Mr. Chair.

That's why we advocate and why all the expert guidance has been on a multi-layered approach, recognizing that there are periods when one will perhaps be unable to maintain social distancing, hence the other non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as hand hygiene and wearing facial coverings. That's why those other measures are just as important.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

What about Air Canada? Can you explain the CleanCare program, the new safety protocol of flying during COVID-19? Do you think customers are responding to your program?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: I'll start quickly, just to give you a sense of the program. CleanCare+ was instituted roughly a month ago. We were the first airline to introduce the temperature checks and the wearing of masks. It's essentially designed to ensure that we take additional measures within the cabin to keep it sterile and clean. Now everybody who arrives on the aircraft will receive a packet that contains hand sanitizer, wipes, a mask and gloves. Then, the aircraft is static-sprayed on every arrival, pre-departure.

There are designated lavatories for crew, as well as for passengers. All the collateral within the aircraft, where you used to see things in the seatback and so on, has been removed to prevent anything from landing on surfaces. That's in addition to the air quality.

Jim, do you want to add anything to that?

• (1440)

Dr. Jim Chung: No, I think you've covered it pretty well, Ferio.

Certainly, just to reiterate, we've instituted a multi-layered approach and are also handing out all those non-pharmaceuticals for intervention, such as masks, the hand sanitizer and the wipes, as well as other measures, including the electrostatic spraying and the hygiene in the cabins to ensure that we minimize the risk as much as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sidhu. We will go now to Dr. Kitchen.

Dr. Kitchen, please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, everybody, for being here.

Mr. Chair, depending on how quickly my answers arrive, I may share my time with Mrs. Jansen.

I will try to point out to Air Canada that there has been a lot of confusion over the directives and advice that have been released by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and you indicated even today there were some issues interprovincially. We know there is no legal obligation for the provinces and territories to provide their health information to the federal government.

I already know my answer to this, but the reality is.... Has your organization experienced a lot of confusion or a little bit of confusion with how you proceed with dealing with the preventative measures when we look at things such as the changing answers we get for wearing masks and taking temperatures, etc.?

Dr. Jim Chung: I can respond to that.

As I said earlier in a previous response, Mr. Chair, there is no manual for this outbreak. We've been learning as we go along, and the manual is literally being written. The data and the science have evolved over time, to the point that it is strongly supportive of facial coverings to this point now.

As the data and science evolve, there are multiple stakeholders as well as different guidances from various organizations. We do follow that up, as do my colleagues in the other airlines, and try to find best practices based on all these guidances.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: It would be considered confusing, would that not be correct, with the various answers?

Dr. Jim Chung: This whole COVID-19 has been somewhat confusing, essentially. Literally, we're on month six, and I remember when it started. I was on a beach somewhere when I got my first notification from BlueDot about this potential SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan.

It has evolved at lightspeed, and everyone has had to adapt. I'm sure WestJet and Air Transat have had to adapt to what feels like lightspeed—

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Dr. Chung.

Mr. Mikoch-Gerke, you talked a bit about the standards and the steps that you've done on cleaning, etc. I just want to touch on one aspect of it. When I flew back and forth from Ottawa, I ran into a number of technicians who were saying how clean they keep the airplanes, etc., with the changing of the HEPA filters, etc., and how sanitary they are. I do believe that is the case.

You talked about fogging electrostatically. We recognize that electrostatic fogging is really getting into places where maybe the cleaners can't get into. My question really comes to another step. I realize the research is very new, but I'm just wondering if WestJet has considered ozone technology.

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for the question.

I'm not aware. I don't believe we've actually looked at that technology at this time. Having said that, we've continued to evolve what health measures we do have, and if there's better technology that the epidemiology reflects could be a means of better cleaning our aircraft, that's certainly something we'll look at as we continue to evolve and review our policies around the cleaning of the cabins and other areas.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Mr. Liebman, have you looked at that with Air Transat?

Mr. Howard Liebman: I'm going to ask my colleague Captain Bourdages to weigh in, if you don't mind, sir.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Go ahead.

Captain Dave Bourdages (Vice-President, In-Flight Service and Customer Experience, Air Transat): Thank you for the question.

As our colleagues from WestJet and Air Canada have mentioned, we're looking at the technology that is available today. We're trying to base our approach on science and what's out there. Electrostatic technology is something that's been proven. We are keeping our eyes and our ears open as to what may come in the future, but we haven't looked specifically at the ozone technology itself.

• (1445)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you very much.

I'm going to shift over to Mrs. Jansen for a quick question.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Thank you.

I'm going to ask Air Transat.

I have a question from constituents, Paul and Bonnie, who booked a flight to Rome last July. They were supposed to leave in August, and it turns out, of course, that all of that has been turned back as non-refundable. Do I tell them that it's a lack of government support, which you mentioned the U.S. and the EU were giving, why this is being put on the backs of individual Canadians?

Mr. Howard Liebman: Thank you for the question.

Just to clarify, we will be flying from Toronto to Rome as of the end of July, so that's the good news.

More generally, to your question, I want to be very clear. First and foremost, our industry requires our customers, and we as a company put our customers first. Each and every one of them received a full future travel credit because of flights being cancelled due to all these restrictions that the government announced.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen: Unfortunately, they're not able to use them because of another issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Jansen.

We go now to Mr. Van Bynen.

Mr. Van Bynen, go ahead. You have five minutes.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses, who are providing us with good insight and perspective into the issues.

My first question is for Air Canada.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Air Canada has worked in close co-operation with Global Affairs Canada to bring Canadians home. Can you share with the committee how many special repatriation flights Air Canada has operated, and how many Canadians were on those flights?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Yes, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the question.

Yes, we actually operated 21 special repatriation flights, and we brought back just over 8,500 Canadians on those flights. In addition, during the pandemic and during the crisis and the taking down and the tightening of border restrictions, we also leveraged our commercial routes that were already in place. When we tabulate it completely, it's roughly 300,000 Canadians who were repatriated back to Canada.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

Dr. Chung, we know that some of the cabin air in an aircraft is recirculated after it's been filtered, so I'm hoping you can elaborate on the ventilation system in the aircraft.

First, how does the ventilation system in an aircraft work when the aircraft is in the air? Can you elaborate on the flow pattern of the air in the aircraft and whether it is more likely to contribute to the spread or whether it is effective in preventing the spread? Is there something that the passengers can do to help the ventilation system, such as perhaps keeping the vents above their seats off? Also, how does this differ when the aircraft is parked and the engines are off in the case of ground delays?

Dr. Jim Chung: Mr. Chair, thank you for the question. That is a very good question, and it does take a bit of a dissertation, so I apologize for a bit of a lengthy answer here.

In flight, the cabin air typically will be a 50-50 mix of bleed air through the engine and recirculated air through the cabin, in most aircraft. The recirculated air through the cabin goes through the high-efficiency particulate arrester filter, which, as mentioned earlier, will filter out 99.9% of all bacteria, fungi and viruses, and it does get recirculated into the cabin.

The flow of air within the cabin itself, though, is not from front to back but side to side, essentially, so it circulates in a transverse pattern relative to the longitudinal axis of the aircraft. Hence, what you will hear from public health officials when they are doing notifications is typically that they are asking for two rows, either in front of or behind the index case passenger, for any potential contact tracing on board an aircraft.

On the ground, the air is plugged into an external air-handling unit that gets plugged into the aircraft.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

My next question is for Air Transat.

What would it mean to the financial viability of the airlines if non-essential travel restrictions were loosened prematurely but then had to be tightened up again due to new waves?

• (1450)

Mr. Howard Liebman: Thank you for the question. I'll answer and see if my colleague Captain Bourdages wants to weigh in.

I think, on behalf of all of us, that nobody wants to get this wrong. First and foremost, the UN civil aviation organization, ICAO, has laid out its CART protocols, and we, the airlines and airports, are working now with the federal government and interdepartmental committees to look at all of this suite of restrictions and

make sure we get it right. The "safe to safe" corridor is one of them.

We want to be clear. We think that we can't wait years until there's a widely available vaccine to get back in the air. We have to get this done safely. We believe there is a path forward, in line with public health recommendations and UN standards, for sure.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Great, thank you.

My understanding is that, with pre-pandemic flights, many of the flights pretty much had to be fully booked for airlines to be profitable. Is that correct? If so, what are the implications post-COVID? Would prices need to go up much higher because of the lower passenger loads?

I'll direct that to each of the airlines. What does the future look like post-pandemic?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Well, I'll start. I'll be quick, to allow my colleagues to respond.

Look, we're a supply-and-demand business. We're in a state right now where demand is off. I don't necessarily see that transition into higher airfares. What it does mean for the businesses is that as long as these restrictions stay in place and we're not looking at balanced ways to reopen the economy, it will have a tremendous impact on the financial viability of these companies in order for them to sustain themselves.

Due to the high fixed cost nature of our business, we're continuing to burn through cash on a daily, monthly and quarterly basis. To put a fine point on it, and we've stated this publicly, we burn roughly \$22 million in cash because of the infrastructure and the support for this business. That equates to about \$1.8 billion a quarter, if you do the math on that. If demand does not pick up, it will have a significant downward impact on these organizations as a whole.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Okay.

Are there other observations?

Mr. Howard Liebman: Sure. I'm happy to jump in as well for Air Transat, just to say that if we are able to safely restart, as we hope, in about a month's time, we're looking at about 15% capacity. In our leisure business, summer is do-or-die. We're already well into summer. Again, we're looking at offering about 15% of our offerings. It is a pretty dire situation. We have not operated or sold tickets for more than three months.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: WestJet.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: Yes, I would just like to add to that as well. I think it is very difficult for us to ascertain what the financial impact will be in the post-COVID world.

Just picking up on what Ferio and Howard have said, I would also like to point to a recent IATA study that actually touched on seat distancing. In addition to the demand that we would require, any sort of health measures would require us to impose certain things such as seat distancing—although we are doing that now.

They completed a study. Out of 122 airlines, on average the break-even point was at a load factor of 77%. On 737 aircraft, which are the majority of our fleet, if we maintain social distancing for the extended future, that would put our load factor at, effectively, 62% of normal capacity. If you look at the break-even point of 77%, and a seat distance capacity of 62%, there are obviously some inherent challenges there.

I think it's hard for us to predict, but there are many factors that go into what the post-COVID world will look like.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Bynen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thériault, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, this is Mr. Desilets. I will be taking over. I hope that is all right.

I would like to thank our guests.

I have a quick question for Mr. Liebman from Air Transat.

What percentage of refund requests were granted?

Mr. Howard Liebman: I do not exactly understand the question.

To date, we have issued credits to our customers worth approximately \$500 million on approximately \$600 million in sales.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are you talking about refunds here?

Mr. Howard Liebman: No, I am not talking about refunds. Everyone has been offered a travel credit. We are not giving refunds.

• (1455)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

I will ask Mr. Pugliese the same question. What percentage of refund requests have been granted to date?

[*English*]

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Thank you. I don't have a percentage for a refunds approach process, but what I can tell you is that just over a billion dollars in refunds on refundable tickets is in process.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You are talking about refundable tickets. Am I to understand that no money has gone to refunding customers' tickets?

[*English*]

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: That is correct. That was living to the provisions by way of the contract that they purchased the ticket under.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: In Quebec, normally, a service that is not rendered automatically implies a full refund. In this case, Mr. Pugliese, I am asking you what difference your company sees between a can-

cellation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a routine flight cancellation, for which you would refund a customer.

[*English*]

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Well, it's a good question. We have a refund for cancelled flights for which the customer purchased a refundable ticket. In the cases where they are not refunded, they did not purchase a refundable ticket.

I just want to highlight again that this is not out of the ordinary for the industry and that it is the practice. As per the CTA statements that were made on April 22, we are following that and adhering to that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: It is unfortunate for us Canadians, because we see that tickets are being refunded in many other countries. You are usually subject to similar constraints and requirements.

I would like to ask you one more brief and probably simpler question, Mr. Pugliese.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Desilets, your time is up.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Davies, we go now to you for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For Air Canada and WestJet, I think yours are the only two airlines for which this question is appropriate. Has your airline seen an increase in air cargo traffic throughout the current pandemic? If so, I'm curious as to whether that has helped to compensate for the decline in passenger revenues. If so, to what degree?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: I will start. We've done a significant amount of work in the area of cargo. We've retrofitted a number of our 777 extended-range aircraft. We've taken out all the seats and retrofitted the aircraft to carry cargo. We've done that with a few of our Airbus products as well.

It doesn't offset the revenue anywhere near what commercial passenger traffic would be, just because of the sheer volumes, but it certainly has helped in this period of time to allow us to get essential goods around the globe. We started that work back in the latter part of March and continue it to date.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

Mr. Mikoch-Gerke, does WestJet have expanded cargo? Do you do cargo?

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: We do cargo, and we have expanded our capacity to the extent that we're able to. We have not reconfigured our aircraft. We've done some increased services of critical goods such as blood plasma. We've also picked up some additional work to help support Canada Post. We've done a couple of all-cargo charters transporting PPE between Dublin and Atlanta.

That said, even though we have seen a slight increase in our cargo traffic in what we've done, it does not supplement for the increased loss in passenger demand.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

Mr. Howard Liebman: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'll answer for Air Transat just very briefly on the cargo question.

Mr. Don Davies: Sure.

Mr. Howard Liebman: I'm pleased to say that as part of our restart plan, we have converted two wide-body Airbus 330 aircraft to freighters, and we're in the process of reaching out to different partners and stakeholders. Just as we repatriated Canadians home at the end of our flying, once we get back in the air, our intention will be to help out in offering lifts to the provinces and the government to bring PPE in from China and other markets.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Liebman. I didn't mean to ignore you. I just presumed, maybe incorrectly—

Mr. Howard Liebman: That we weren't flying. Absolutely.

Mr. Don Davies: —that you didn't do cargo.

My last question would be for WestJet and Air Canada.

I know that, on April 27, WestJet asked for a federal exemption from the federal labour minister to eliminate the requirement of 16 weeks' notice for a mass layoff of more than 50 workers. I'm curious to know if you received that exemption from the federal government. Air Canada, it's the same for you. I would like to know if

you applied for an exemption and, if you did, what the status of that is.

• (1500)

Mr. Jared Mikoch-Gerke: We revoked our application for that exemption.

Mr. Don Davies: Okay.

Air Canada?

Mr. Ferio Pugliese: Yes, we have made that application, and we have not received a response.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

The Chair: That wraps up our questioning on our second panel today.

I'd like to thank the members, as always, for their very tough questions. They were good questions.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for giving us their time, for sharing with us their context and challenges, and for all the great information they've provided.

I'd like to acknowledge particularly the translators. This is a very challenging environment for translators. We have all these different end points where we all have different audio situations and different networking, and it's extremely challenging for the translators. I would certainly like to thank them for helping us bridge the gap between the two languages and for all the work they do. It's very much appreciated.

Thank you, everybody.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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