

**Coronavirus disease  
(COVID-19)**



# Industry Advisory Roundtable on COVID-19 testing: Border measures

Response to the Expert Panel Report on “Priority strategies to optimize testing and quarantine at Canada’s borders”

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## Foreword

The Industry Advisory Roundtable on COVID-19 Testing, Screening, Tracing and Data Management is pleased to release its third report. This report reiterates the importance of balancing public health measures to reduce the importation of COVID-19 with the need to ensure the free flow of people and goods across the Canadian border and support economic recovery.



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## Executive summary

Soon after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, international borders around the world closed in an effort to limit the spread of the virus. To ensure the health and safety of individuals, the movement of people and goods was restricted. Yet, it was important to maintain access to essential goods and services and sustain trade-based economic sectors.

Canada responded in step with other countries. The government implemented public health measures such as mandatory testing and quarantine when crossing international borders.

Restrictions are necessary to curb the spread of the virus. Yet, in a complex environment such as international borders, it's crucial to implement and clearly communicate public health measures effectively and clearly.

Border measures such as testing regimes and other public health measures must be based on the most recent science-based public health evidence. Such measures must also leverage advances in testing options, consider vaccination rates and balance the needs of industries operating across borders. Furthermore, plans must be easy to implement consistently across several entry modes. They should also be communicated broadly and include a roadmap for easing or increasing border restrictions based on objective criteria and benchmarks.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, the Roundtable is offering insights and recommendations to adjust current border measures. We have based our recommendations on evidence collected from international scans and observations from industries that move goods and people across borders.

The Roundtable recognizes the effort required to implement plans for easing border restrictions, given rapidly evolving public health circumstances and emerging variants of concern. Prompt action is needed to design and implement a border measures plan that reduces the risk of the virus spreading while proactively moving towards economic recovery.

## Current border environment

In March 2020, the ability of people to move across the Canadian border was restricted. Since then, several measures were taken to reduce the importation of COVID-19 and limit the spread of the virus. As circumstances changed over the following weeks and months, border measures became more restrictive.

In early 2021, more stringent public health measures were introduced for non-essential travellers at air and land borders. This was done to reduce the importation rate of COVID-19 and its variants of concern. Measures included the following:

- mandatory pre-departure COVID-19 molecular test
- contact/quarantine plan using the ArriveCAN application
- on-arrival and post-arrival testing
- for travellers arriving by air, mandatory 3-day quarantine in government-authorized hotels followed by quarantine or isolation at an approved location such as the traveller's home

The Government of Canada and the aviation industry also worked together on a plan to suspend Canadian air carrier flights to and from Mexico and Caribbean countries from January 31 to April 30, 2021. Then on February 3, 2021, all incoming international commercial passenger flights to Canada were restricted to the 4 largest airports: Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver.

In order to prevent importation of variants of concern, the Government of Canada took additional measures that included suspension of flights from certain countries. Canada suspended all commercial and passenger flights from the United Kingdom between December 20, 2020 and January 6, 2021. Additionally, on April 22, 2021, all commercial and private passenger flights from India and Pakistan were suspended in response to a high number of cases detected among individual travellers on flights originating from the two countries. These measures are in place until at least June 21, 2021.

Internal data from the Public Health Agency of Canada indicates the following positivity rates for the seven days up to and including May 27, 2021, for air and land travel combined:

- the 7-day average positivity rate for testing on arrival was 0.2%
- the 7-day average positivity rate for second tests was 0.3%

As well, all positive tests undergo genomic sequencing to identify variants of concern.

Cross-border travel volumes decreased significantly from December 2019 to December 2020. [Statistics Canada data](#) show that the:

- number of travellers to Canada was down 93%
- total number of international travellers to and from Canada declined from 96.8 million in 2019 to 25.9 million in 2020

Air travel has experienced the most dramatic shifts, as travellers arriving by air are mostly non-exempt from border measures. In comparison, [travellers exempt from border measures](#) make up the vast majority of land border traffic.

Essential travel continued largely unimpeded, as governments recognized the importance of preserving vital supply chains to ensure that food, fuel and life-saving medicines continue to reach people.



## A shifting landscape

As of May 28, 2021, variants of concern [account for an estimated 70% of reported cases in recent weeks](#). Any border measures must account for this new reality.

At the same time, individuals and organizations within and outside of Canada are increasingly looking for:

- a concrete roadmap to the economic reopening of the country
- clear guidelines for restarting cross-border travel

Plans and guidelines should clearly spell out the public health criteria for adjusting border measures. They should also outline when and how restrictions should be eased in the short and longer term. Guidelines must take into consideration the risk of importing new variants of concern in the move towards a safe restart of the trade and tourism industries that operate internationally.

As scientists learn more about how the virus spreads, as travellers are tested regularly and as vaccination efforts increase, it will be easier to manage the risk of importing COVID-19 and its variants.

Nevertheless, while the international border is open, there's always the risk of importation. For a safe reopening, we need a risk framework that takes into account public health measures and socio-economic factors. To bring the risk to an acceptable level, detection and surveillance options should be part of any robust border testing strategy.

Evidence concerning restrictive border measures, including lengthy quarantines, shows that the effectiveness of these measures declines over time. Non-compliance increases when measures are too tough and/or not communicated well. This can counter efforts to reduce the spread of the virus and break the chains of transmission.

As more and more people in Canada and abroad are vaccinated, it will be necessary to update Canada's strategy to allow the movement of vaccinated travellers, based on emerging scientific evidence and while respecting public health measures.

Complex border measures may present significant implementation challenges, which can lead to disparities in how the various rules, regulations and guidelines are applied at ports of entry. This may have a negative impact on people crossing the Canadian border and those industries engaged in cross-border and transnational business. Small and medium companies may be especially impacted.

Although essential workers have largely been exempt from border measures, the Roundtable is aware of the challenges they face when rules are applied inconsistently. For example, several Canadian companies have reported incidences where some engineers, technicians and other specialists have faced challenges crossing the Canada-US border and meeting their contractual obligations to provide skilled services. Some business executives and professional services providers with cross-border responsibilities are constrained in their ability to manage their operations effectively. As well, disruptions to the cross-border travel of these workers could expose businesses to legal recourse from clients for failure to meet commitments.

Many countries, including Canada, are aggressively rolling out vaccination regimes and partially permitting the movement of people (with restrictions). Canada is now the top country in the G7, G20 and OECD for vaccination rates of first doses. As the campaign shifts to second doses, Canada must continue to reach vulnerable populations to ensure vaccine equity and broad-based coverage to facilitate re-opening the economy and growth.

Canada's biggest trading partner also shares its largest border. Efforts should be made to align public health and economic recovery goals between Canada and the United States. Prioritizing the Canada-US border would be consistent with the commitments made by both countries in the [Roadmap for a Renewed U.S.-Canada Partnership](#). This roadmap recommends a coordinated and science-based approach to ease border restrictions in the future.

Countries around the world are also exploring cooperative arrangements with other countries and looking at piloting innovative technology and information-sharing platforms designed to facilitate safe travel, such as vaccine certification.

Implementing significant changes requires wide support and cooperation, as highlighted in the Industry Strategy Council's [Restart, recover, and reimagine prosperity for all Canadians](#) report. The report proposes a three-phase action plan—restart, recover, and reimagine—focused on investment and growth, and embodies values and principles of action and shared responsibility to mobilize all sectors to propel Canada forward. The phases are anchored in five recommendations to safely restore confidence and commerce, stabilize the hardest-hit sectors, reignite growth by doubling down on a future-oriented investment plan, develop an ambitious industrial strategy, and establish renewed public-private sector partnerships and investments anchored in a sound and rigorous fiscal framework.

At the same time, we must recognize we live in times of uncertainty and contend with a rapidly shifting landscape. Plans should be flexible in order to balance public health concerns with the desire to ease restrictions. We must work with public health experts to establish and clearly communicate criteria and benchmarks to help travellers and businesses understand how and when border restrictions will be eased or increased in the coming months. Provinces and territories have outlined their reopening plans, with an important strength being the use of benchmarks to move between several steps of restrictions. Communicating a clear path with well-defined criteria will provide a much-needed level of predictability for reopening to industry and travellers alike.

# Recommendations

The Industry Roundtable recommends an approach to border measures that include both short- and long-term recommendations.

## Short-term recommendations

- Provide clear definitions of cross-border essential travellers and apply these in a consistent manner at all ports of entry.
- Recognize that companies are well positioned to identify essential travellers within their organization, enabling them to leverage existing domestic testing regimes for employees to demonstrate that public health requirements are met. Accepting employer-issued proof of testing would shift the onus away from the border and alleviate traveller flow pressures.
- Explicitly state the conditions for testing travellers and the criteria for shortening or removing quarantine measures.
- Connect the pace of vaccination rollout with public health measures and the gradual lifting of travel restrictions, and include clear procedures for vaccinated, partially vaccinated and unvaccinated travellers. This may need to adjust as new variants of concern emerge.
- Enable industry to take an active role in meeting vaccination targets in Canada by supporting priority vaccination of cross-border essential workers. Aggressive vaccination targets for these workers would help companies contribute to the safe reopening of the economy in a timely manner.
- Apply measures consistently at air and land borders, whenever possible
- Provide clear, straightforward messaging for every person and company involved in the cross-border movement of people and goods. Clear communication leads to effective, consistent implementation of any border measure and subsequent updates.

## Longer-term recommendations

- Take into account evolving scientific evidence and adopt emerging findings. For example, evidence suggests that rapid antigen testing can be effective as a screening tool and adds another layer of defence when used as part of surveillance testing.
- Ensure that processes, information systems and infrastructure needed to implement modified border measures are in place and can manage increased travel volumes effectively.
- Re-position Canada as a competitive participant in the tourism and global trade sectors through enabling border measures that facilitate the movement of people and goods across international borders.
- In collaboration with the private sector, the government should develop an enhanced framework to better prepare for and respond to future pandemics.