

Rapid testing at the border is a shot in the arm for Canada

By DEANNA HORTON (/AUTHOR/DEANNA-HORTON) MAY 19, 2021

We might also give some consideration to the notion that a Canada-U.S. joint border management framework might better prepare us for the next pandemic.



The Niagara Falls International Rainbow Bridge is pictured. Let's accommodate the pent-up demand for a getaway from our U.S. visitors. For those Canadians who are justifiably concerned about importing COVID-19 or its nastier variants, there could be a readily available solution: rapid PCR testing, writes Deanna Horton. *Pixabay photograph by Ray Miller*

Getting tough at the border can be done in an intelligent, targeted way. As Canadians, let's do ourselves a favour by opening the border to the U.S.—in planned stages—starting before the summer tourist season. Having another summer of border shutdown will do unnecessary, perhaps irreparable, harm to an economic sector, tourism, and hospitality, where “working from home” is not generally an option.

Let's accommodate the pent-up demand for a getaway from our U.S. visitors. For those Canadians who are justifiably concerned about importing COVID-19 or its nastier variants, there could be a readily available solution: rapid PCR [polymerase chain reaction] testing. This could be an interim step as we await vaccinations for the majority of our populations.

Not surprisingly, international travel to Canada was down by 90 per cent in 2020. And apart from the tourism accommodations that would normally house our visitors, the retail and hospitality industries where they would normally spend their money have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As noted in a report by RBC Economics (<https://www6.royalbank.com/assets/di-secure/images/article/now-and-noteworthy/2020/women-in-labour-force-2020.pdf>), it has been women who have borne the brunt of job losses in these high-contact sectors.

Overnight visitors are very important to communities in both countries. The fact that the initial border shutdown of 30 days has been continuously renewed, but without any systematic approach to a more predictable solution is troubling, especially to the businesses who need to plan for their future.

As an example: according to Zac Gribble, executive director of Destination Stratford in Ontario, up to a third of overnight guests in a “normal” year are U.S. visitors. Getting them back will be critically important to Stratford's economic recovery.

Rapid testing is a proven method—we just don't use it enough. And there is expertise close at hand, including with the Rapid Screening Consortium.

Not every land border would have to have testing facilities, but certainly the major ones could. Americans crossing at land borders would be directed into testing lanes on the U.S. side and then into a parking lot (existing traffic configurations at many crossings could accommodate this).

Once tested, if an issue is identified, visitors would have to turn around. But given the recent announcement that 100 million Americans have been fully vaccinated (and 55 per cent of adults have received at least their first shot) they will be more confident in crossing the border, and the risks to Canadians of their doing so are massively reduced.

A certificate of negative test results would be taken across the border. The visitors' contact information would also be entered into the COVID Alert App to facilitate contact tracing.

Having to wait 30 minutes may deter people who are coming for lunch. But for those Americans who are longing for their week at the beach, the cottage, in the mountains, or enjoying big-city culture and cuisine, the wait will be worth it.

The situation would be similar to the airports which currently allow international flights—visitors would be directed to a socially distanced line for testing.

The same scenario in reverse could take place for Canadians wishing to cross into the U.S. The key both ways is that without a negative test result, visitors (or returnees for that matter) do not cross the border.

There are, of course, longer-term solutions which we should be working on now, such as the kind of vaccine passports currently being tested in the U.K. The IATA travel pass is another option, particularly for inbound air travellers. However, there are privacy concerns that will have to be addressed. And it may take some time for Canada and the U.S. to come up with a joint proposal, or at least a parallel one.

At a recent discussion of The Wilson Center's Canada Institute's Wilson Task Force on Public Health and the U.S.-Canadian Border, task force members also mentioned the social costs of the longer shutdown—missing the community of extended family and friends. Apart from the economic boost to having a reopened border, there will important intangible benefits from these renewed interactions.

Implementing rapid testing at the border would be a shot in the arm for Canada. We might also give some consideration to the notion that a Canada-U.S. joint border management framework might better prepare us for the next pandemic.

Deanna Horton is affiliated with the Munk School, the Wilson Center, and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

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