



March 5, 2020

Hon. Chrystia Freeland, P.C., M.P.  
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs  
Prime Minister's Office  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A3

Dear Minister,

As we discussed yesterday, COVID-19 is posing yet another uncertainty for business in an already very uncertain economic climate. Many Canadian businesses are currently experiencing the impact and, should COVID-19 continue to spread throughout Canada, the damage to our economy will be considerable. In particular, our most vulnerable businesses – SMEs – risk being the hardest hit if they are not prepared.

The Canadian Chamber has begun building a pandemic planning toolkit for our members and is working with them to ensure that we are aware of their challenges and are helping in any way we can. Yesterday, I chaired a meeting/conference call with more than forty other associations to get a sense of what their members are saying regarding the impact of COVID-19 on them, what tools they're providing them and how we can work together – and with government – to mitigate the impact in the event of a pandemic. A summary of that meeting is attached.

The associations that met yesterday would be pleased to serve as a source of information for the government, in addition to assisting in providing a conduit for information from the government to the private sector. We also want to be the government's partner in preventing the spread of the virus and in mitigating its impact as well as, most importantly, providing credible, science-based information on the virus without fostering panic.

We would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you, your Committee colleagues and members of your team either in person or by teleconference to learn more about the government's strategy and to share information about how our respective members are being affected at an early date convenient to you.



Minister, we hope that Canada will not be hit with a COVID-19 pandemic. However, the economic chill of the prospect of a pandemic is already having an effect as evidenced by the Bank of Canada's reduction in its overnight lending rate yesterday. We believe if there ever was a time for business and government to come together, this is it, and we are anxious to assist the government in its efforts on behalf of all Canadians.

Sincerely,

Hon. Perrin Beatty, O.C., P.C.  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Canadian Chamber of Commerce

Attachment

*c.c.: Cabinet COVID-19 Committee members:*

- *Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos, P.C.*
- *Hon. Navdeep Bains, P.C.*
- *Hon. William Blair, P.C.*
- *Hon. Patricia Hajdu, P.C.*
- *Hon. Mélanie Joly, P.C.*
- *Hon. William Morneau, P.C.*
- *Hon. Carla Qualtrough, P.C.*

*Association Meeting Participants and Invitees*



Summary  
COVID-19 Association Meeting/Teleconference  
Canadian Chamber of Commerce Offices  
March 4, 2020

Approximately forty associations participated in the meeting/teleconference. Several reported that they are equipping themselves and their members by providing guidance on protecting employees from the virus; planning for employees to work remotely if required and possible; adjusting travel policies; cancelling or rescheduling events if social distancing is recommended; and assessing the potential financial impacts of members pulling back on sponsorships and memberships due to being negatively affected by the virus.

There was a consensus that SMEs are the most vulnerable as they don't have either the human or financial resources to develop their own pandemic plans or large financial reserves.

Some associations are surveying members regarding the current and potential impact of COVID-19. While their survey data has yet to come in, many reported a fear amongst their members of the virus's potential impacts. These impacts range from not being able to procure essential inputs for products, including many of the products included in emergency kits (non-perishable food, protective gear and disinfectants/cleaners) to the economic blow of cancelling major festivals and conferences.

Specific examples included the post-secondary educational sector, which gave a stark picture of the potential impact on its institutions. International students contribute an estimated \$21.6 billion to the Canadian economy annually (on tuition, accommodation and other expenses associated with study at universities, colleges, language schools and K-12). For universities, thirty-five percent of international students are from China, so losing them for even one semester would be a serious blow. The agricultural sector said its members are looking for more information about whether there is a potential for COVID-19 to be transmitted to farm animals from humans.

All the associations agreed to work together by sharing resources and information, including new tools we understand are coming from the Public Health Agency of Canada. By working together we'll serve our members better by providing them with a broader perspective and more tools than we can individually. The associations also undertook to continuing gathering information on the effects of the virus on their sector and on specific actions being taken within their sectors.

Some suggestions on how the government can assist business in preparing for and mitigating the impact of a pandemic are:



- Ensuring communications are science-based, up-to-date (e.g., regarding human-to-animal transmission) and easily available;
- Ensuring the tone of communications is factual but emphasizes the current low risk of infection and spread in Canada;
- Co-ordinating with the provincial/territorial governments on guidance for employers on such issues as obligations to employees who become ill and/or are self-isolating;
- Waiving the Employment Insurance waiting period for employees stricken with COVID-19;
- Consider measures to assist SMEs including more flexibility on tax filing/payment deadlines and accelerating payments owed by government to businesses. While these measures would not add to costs for government, they would assist businesses, particularly SMEs that will be experiencing cash flow problems.

Participants welcomed the news that the Deputy Prime Minister will chair a Cabinet committee to deal with issues related to COVID-19. We will invite Minister Freeland to meet with the group at an early date whenever her schedule can accommodate the meeting.