

CTV Toronto

©Sun. Feb. 18 2007 3:19 PM ET



Critics blast decline of Ontario train service

Canadian Press

TORONTO — The federal government's willingness to let train service erode in northern Ontario is a disastrous setback for beleaguered tourism operators and another example of the region's crumbling infrastructure, say industry watchers.

While the tourism industry provincewide has suffered numerous setbacks, the situation in the north, where every dollar and visitor is critical to breaking even, has been particularly tough, said Doug Reynolds of Nature and Outdoor Tourism Ontario.

The latest setback is an announcement from CN Railway that it's reducing passenger train service, starting this summer, along the 470-kilometre line between Sault Ste. Marie and Hearst.

Instead of four round-trips per week the schedule is down to three.

That will affect existing reservations for tourism operators and make it even harder to acquire new ones, said Reynolds, whose association represents over 500 tourism operations.

"We've been suffering under all kinds of negative impacts for several years and it's going to be one more, it's not what an already troubled industry needs," he said.

A strong Canadian dollar that discourages foreign tourists, high fuel costs and a border that's increasingly difficult to cross because of confusion over passport requirements are just some of the factors hurting the industry, said Reynolds.

"The list goes on and on and on."

Still, Reynolds said no one's blaming CN.

He said the responsibility for the slip in service falls to the federal government, which funds remote transportation services.

"The passenger rail problem is a part of a much broader transportation and infrastructure problem that the tourism industry and the North has in general," he said.

"If we want to increase economic development in the North, if we want to increase tourism as an essential industry in the North... then there are a lot of arguments in favour of improving passenger rail service."

Al Errington is one of many tourism operators now forced to call hundreds of customers who booked summer vacations in northern Ontario with plans that include a scheduled train trip north.

Hopefully, tourists will adjust their vacation plans, he said.

If that doesn't happen, Errington said it could cost him a couple hundred thousand dollars.

"I have had people reserving for this summer since early May of last spring," Errington said. "I am hoping that most of them only shorten their vacation and don't cancel."

The government's unwillingness to pay more to maintain service is symptomatic of a general attitude of neglect towards passenger train service in Canada, he said.

"We talk to Europeans and they think it's bizarre, they're used to having reliable train service and, with what we have to deal with, they think it's absolutely bizarre and they wonder what our government is doing," said Errington.

"There used to be over 30 resorts along the (rail line) and because of a lack of planning and neglect.... they've been slowly closing to the point there's less than 10 now."

Reynolds said it's a shame because he hears from potential customers all the time that would love to make a trip to northern Ontario -- if it was just a little easier.

A spokeswoman for Transport Canada said the government provides \$2.1 million in annual funding for CN's train service in northern Ontario but doesn't have any input on its operations.

"We have a funding agreement ... to ensure this service is continued but as to how the scheduling is done, it's a decision that (they) have to make to work within the funding they're allocated," said Cathy Cossaboom.

"We realize it is an inconvenience for the people who have booked, but I understand at least three months notice was given to the operators."

New Democrat MP Tony Martin, who represents Sault Ste. Marie, said the government needs to do more than just maintain the funding status quo.

"Anybody who lives and works and tries to do business in northern Ontario knows transportation is always one of the big challenges," said Martin.

"Train, which has historically kept this country together and has served the North so well over the years, has begun to deteriorate."