

Penticton, BC – Media Release

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Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce

## Future Emergency Measures Must Be Based on Real-time Information and Needs

Before the 2024 wildfire season begins, the Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce has written the Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness Bowinn Ma seeking assurance that more effective protocols and accountabilities will be put into place before an emergency measure like a travel ban is ordered.

“When Minister Ma ordered the travel ban last August, the intent was to open up hotel space for those evacuating West Kelowna’s McDougall Creek Wildfire. If anyone from her ministry had first taken the small step of contacting our municipal government, they would have learned that spaces already available for evacuees were all but empty and should have made them question if ordering such a drastic measure in Penticton and throughout the South Okanagan was necessary?” says Michael Magnusson, the Chamber’s Executive Director.

Instead, the government moved forward with a travel ban on August 19<sup>th</sup> at the height of Penticton’s tourism season and resulted in the cancellation of the Ironman Triathlon to be held later that week along with millions of dollars in lost economic activity. Originally announced to run until September 4<sup>th</sup>, it was only four days later that the ban was lifted after it was clear how unneeded it was.

“The Chamber wants to ensure that the provincial government has developed a much more comprehensive process before a measure as serious and economically devastating as a travel ban can be ordered,” states Chamber President Nicole Clark.

The Chamber has proposed that the government analyze real-time information provided by evacuation centres and their online Evacuee Registration and Assistance (ERA) site, which may require additional questions to determine accommodation needs and locations. Data should also be gathered from surrounding local governments along with hotels/motels to measure the current number of available accommodations, and to use public spaces first.

“Setting up these kinds of information gathering and analytical tools before we’re into another wildfire season will allow the government to more accurately assess what emergency measures are actually needed,” Magnusson believes.

The Chamber recognizes that hindsight is 20/20 but remains disappointed that since the travel ban was lifted after only four days, Minister Ma has never answered questions posed by the tourism industry as to how the ban was ordered in the first place, nor has there been discussions around providing compensation for the financial losses incurred by local operators as a result of the ban.

With a lower-than-average snowpack creating an even more extreme risk of wildfires this year, the Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce has asked the provincial government to assure local businesses, particularly those in the tourism and hospitality industry, that the government has modified their protocols to produce much more balanced and effective actions in emergency situations.

“With wildfires becoming an annual occurrence, we want to ensure that decisions are made quickly, and also accurately.” concludes Clark. “If last year demonstrated anything, it was that a little more information could have prevented a lot of hardship for Penticton and the South Okanagan.”

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The Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce is a dynamic, trusted and respected business authority representing approximately 500 local business and non-profit members that drive economic and social growth and improvement on behalf of, and in support of our members and the community.