



Regional Tourism
ORGANIZATION

An aerial photograph of a large lake with numerous small, forested islands. The water is a deep blue, and many sailboats are visible on the water. The islands are covered in lush green trees. The sky is clear and blue.

COVID-19 RTO9 2020 Immediate Action Plan & Interim Strategy

Strategy Document

April 22, 2020



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Executive Summary

COVID-19 is proving to be the most significant threat to the viability of tourism across the globe.

Overview

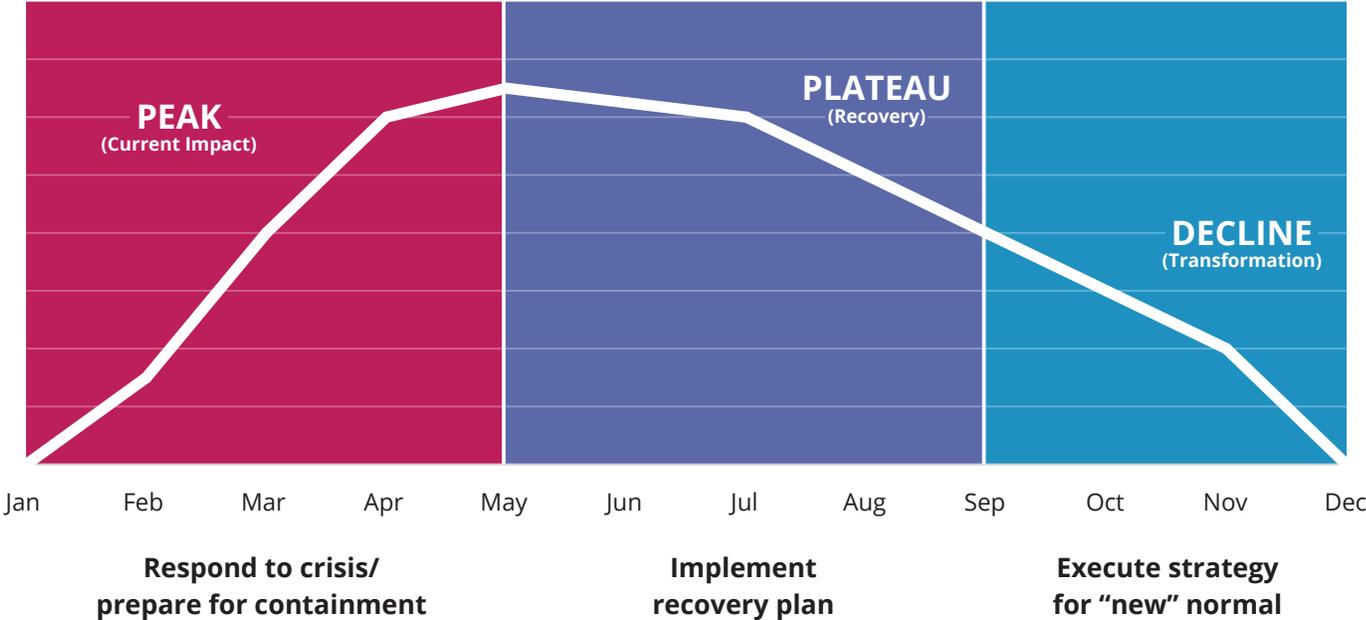
COVID-19 is likely to be deemed the most abrupt shock to the global economy and society in modern history. The global travel and tourism industry is profoundly impacted and will face a real risk to near-term survival of many tourism businesses and a significant disruption to communities, SMEs, trade channels and destinations. While we must take serious action to control the spread of the virus, we must also take action to protect the livelihoods of the millions of individuals and businesses impacted. Global tourism may not return to 2019 quickly (e.g., Tourism Economics, a division of Oxford Economics suggests a return to 2019 tourism levels by 2023, under certain conditions), and while tourism may recover albeit in an altered form, our proposal and action plans are developed with a focus on resilience as a competitive advantage with as much downside mitigation for recovery as a first priority once the pre-conditions for resumption of tourism are met with societal and travel restrictions gradually lifted.

The region will face challenges in tourism recovery in the coming months. Some of our signature experiences like Thousand Islands Cruises are under threat with a great deal of uncertainty on dates for re-opening and the form that continued operation may take. Business continuity for some in the region remains a challenge as well, in particular for those restaurants, small businesses, theatre and cultural institutions and experience providers. On the positive side, RTO9's strong reliance on local and regional source markets will be an opportunity as those destinations will be among the first to recover as the lifting or continuation of travel restrictions across Canada and the globe will be different.

Regardless of these challenges, the gradual recovery of the tourism market will require a strategic focus. The end of the pandemic is still not in sight and execution of strategy will depend on when that may occur and the form it takes. Initiatives outlined in the 2020-2021 business plan that do not directly and immediately support recovery will be set aside until recovery is well-underway.

COVID-19 is characterized as having a peak, plateau and a decline; destinations need to address each phase with separate approaches.

Overview



This is an evolving plan that details actions to respond to the immediate crisis (through May) and outline a strategic approach to recover 2020.

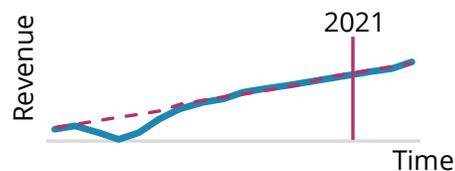
Purpose & Methodology

As the region transitions from peak COVID-19 to its plateau, there are specific actions that RTO9 can implement immediately to support tourism's shift to a recovery stage and considering that the situation is evolving day-by-day. This document outlines an immediate action plan based on the knowledge we have to date and on what some destinations are doing to manage their COVID-19 response and in preparation for recovery.

In the recovery stage, for the RTO9 region, with the most important summer season fast-approaching and with continued uncertainty on virus containment, relaxing of borders and stay at home orders, we engaged in developing a recovery management strategy to determine the levers that need to be addressed to drive the most rapid recovery looking at three possible scenarios:

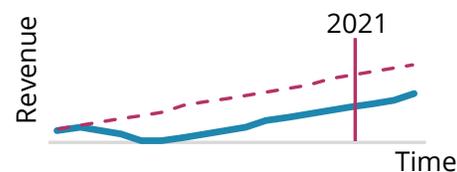
Assessing drivers of recovery in each of these scenarios offers the RTO9 region and its tourism stakeholders a set of prioritized options that support a tourism recovery game plan. It's sole focus is to determine which marketing and product development drivers the region needs to hold in order to support the most rapid recovery of the destination.

BEST: Tourism begins June 30



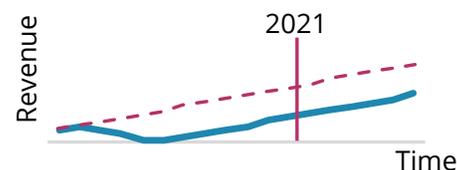
- Intra- and inter-provincial restrictions eased by June 30
- U.S. travel restrictions eased by July 31
- Global restrictions eased by July 31

MID: Tourism begins July 31

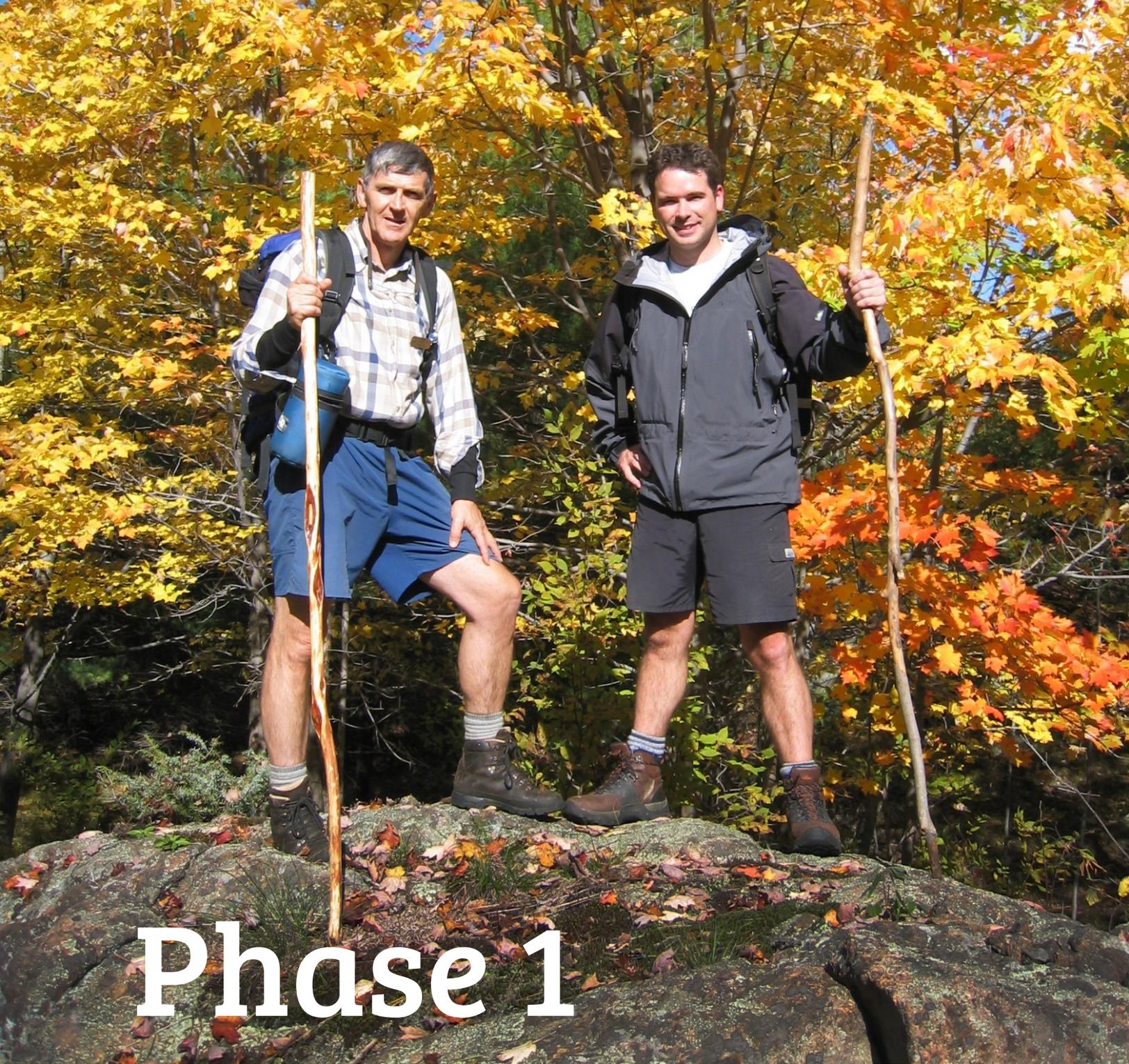


- Intra and inter-provincial restrictions eased by July 31
- U.S. travel restrictions eased by August 31
- Global restrictions eased by August 31

WORST: Tourism begins October 15



- Intra and inter-provincial restriction eased by October 15
- U.S. travel restrictions eased by October 15
- Global restrictions eased by October 15



Phase 1

Responding to the Crisis Now (Through May 2020)

PHASE 1 is characterized by COVID-19 continuing to spread quickly and globally. Tourism is practically non-existent, travel is restricted, and there are massive tourism job losses and business closures. RTO leadership, support, funding is vital and needed quickly.

Recovery Leadership

1. Demonstrate continued recovery leadership by developing and communicating a comprehensive COVID-19 plan and disseminating useful and practicable information, programs and support across all eight DMO partners and tourism stakeholders:
 - Communicate the 'RTO9 2020 Immediate Action Plan & Interim Strategy' to industry stakeholders and provide weekly/every other week status updates on its implementation (and update existing RTO9 Communication Strategy and Editorial Calendar).
 - Monitor all COVID-19 related material online from domestic and global sources creating a repository of resources that may be useful to tourism organizations across the region.
 - Support tourism SMEs navigate programs and funding available for recovery by understanding all options available to them.
 - Create a network of tourism industry advisors who can provide one-on-one support to tourism organizations that are facing COVID-19 challenges (e.g., human resources, finance, business operations and more).
 - Communicate available programs and funding options via a dedicated microsite and webinar series (see Phase 1: Marketing & Promotion preparation).
 - Continue working with advocacy organizations to communicate the value of tourism to regional and provincial economies (to continue to advocate in local economies for when tourism returns).

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Immediate Training Opportunities

2. Identify immediate training opportunities, for example by leveraging the upcoming Tourism HR toolkit, to support DMO partner and tourism organization training needs post-pandemic:
 - Assess training opportunities, and identify training resources or prepare modules through use of advisory network (see Phase 1: Recovery Leadership) to prepare tourism organizations for post-recovery.
 - Launch training modules to prepare for 2021 and beyond.

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High-Profile Asset Inventory & Assessment

3. In collaboration with the eight DMO partners, conduct an immediate product and asset inventory and assessment to identify high profile and signature products, experiences, regions, attractions and accommodations that have a high likelihood to recover and continue to operate in 2020:
 - Conduct an inventory of high-profile and signature products, experiences, regions, attractions and accommodations that have a high likelihood to recover and continue to operate in 2020, and establish potential post-COVID-19 impacts on visitor experience in the region (e.g., capacity, line-up requirements, health checks, etc.).
 - Connect with identified high-profile and influential assets to provide one-on-one advisory support depending on their needs (see Phase 1: Recovery Leadership).
 - Begin creating itinerary concepts based on available resources, the impact of COVID-19 on them and their role on attracting target visitors quickly for the summer and fall seasons.

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Marketing & Promotion Preparation

4. Prepare a pan-regional marketing and promotion plan based on market research insights to promote RTO9 to those markets that are most likely to visit, i.e., regional (GTA; Ottawa; Montreal), return visitors, intrepid visitors) and leveraging initiatives that both support high profile and high demand products, regions, experiences and accommodations that reflect the scenario realities of when travel restrictions will be eased:
 - Retain marketing and communications support to prepare pan-regional marketing and promotion plan and initial recovery campaigns.
 - Conduct tactical marketing research survey and digital focus groups for perception, attitudinal and behaviour insights on local, GTA, Ottawa and Montreal travel consumers.
 - Develop initial “shop-local” campaign to support local SMEs in the hospitality and tourism space.
 - Prepare an initial pan-regional marketing and promotion plan for when pre-conditions for recovery are evident.
 - Create a recovery or resiliency microsite to house access to all resources available to tourism stakeholders across the region.



Phase 2

Preparing for Recovery (Through 2020)

PHASE 2 is characterized by Initial signs of COVID-19 being contained. Tourism is beginning to emerge (mainly domestic) and the RTOs are strategically charting their post-COVID-19 reality while executing short-term recovery campaigns.

Itinerary Development

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
1. Itinerary development: Develop 3-5, 1-7 day itineraries aligned to the product categories for summer and fall 2020, with a balance by each of the eight RTO9 regions and pan-regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RTO9 (lead) DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3-5 itineraries per each of the 6 product categories)

Source Markets and Target Audiences

Source market for itineraries and campaigns begin with travel from within the region, Ottawa and Toronto, and depending on travel restrictions, expand to Montreal.

Target audiences for these campaigns will be similar those of focus during 2019 – repeat visitors coming for getaways, as couples and with families seeking escape from the city. Strong evidence suggests that the U.S. market will not return as quickly; that the U.S./Canada border may not re-open for tourism quickly nor that the U.S., with challenges in containment and politics will be perceived by Canadian travellers to be a safe destination to visit this summer.

Evidence also suggests that “road trip” and “beaches” are on the minds of travellers (April 1 Trip Advisor survey on international travellers: 44% dream of a road trip and 40% of a beach vacation now). Additionally, Canadians will not be eager to fly (new rules on flying are not yet clear) supporting a strong drive market for the region.

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Packaging Framework

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
2. Packaging framework: Develop a packaging framework and SME offering aligned to the identified itineraries; launched via a simple call for proposals – the intention is to provide support to SMEs to organically create packages meeting specific criteria around itineraries, products, season (summer and fall) and consumer target	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SME support identified

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Recovery Marketing Campaigns

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
<p>3. Recovery marketing campaigns: Develop marketing campaigns, together with the eight RTO9 regions, to reflect the following themes (for each theme, RTO9 destinations will develop itineraries and trip package ideas to support remaining tourism businesses assets):</p> <p>a. Come Visit Me: Visiting family and friends (VFR) represents +80% of travel to the region now. There will be pent up demand to visit relatives in Kingston or Trenton; need to encourage hotel stays while visiting family, respecting slower movement out of physical distancing (not staying in homes for duration of visit). Focus on people of the place as the hosts</p> <p>b. The RTO9 Road Trip: Experience the highlights, gems and hideaways of the Region by car, by bicycle or by motorcycle and RV – stop for a Thousand Islands Cruise, take in a show, museum or art gallery, or just hang out on the beach</p> <p>c. The Getaway to the RTO9 region: Whether its to the beach, a cool dip in the lakes and rivers or a farm to table dinner, or just enjoy the spectacular sights, a getaway to the region offers a trip back to simpler times in Eastern Ontario’s quaint towns and villages.</p> <p>d. The Culinary Delight: A farm to table dinner, picnics in the park; or visit a local winery if its food you love, you are in no better place than Eastern Ontario. Further build the culinary story to highlight the people of the region that are offering homegrown produce, food products, beer, wine, etc., heavily promoting Aug-Nov experiences which are peak culinary experiences months</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched campaigns

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Engage OTA Partner

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
4. Engage OTA partners: Engage one OTA partner (i.e., Trip Advisor) as part of the campaign and highlight a series of the commissionable packages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• RTO9 (lead)• DMO partners (support)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Retained OTA• Launched OTA campaigns

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Resiliency Program Plans & Implementation

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
<p>5. Resiliency program plans & implementation: Develop 2-3 industry-directed programs (training, co-op marketing, etc.) to support the most vulnerable tourism assets that also are major influencers of tourism that have been impacted and/or may continue to be impacted by social distancing requirements (e.g., training of staff; Monday-Tuesday restaurant festival; etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-3 SME support programs

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Joint Promotion Campaigns

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
<p>6. Joint promotion campaigns: Engage surrounding RTOs (specifically RTO11), sector associations like Resorts of Ontario, Wine Growers of Ontario, Ontario Parks, SLPC, and commercial partners like CAA, Canadian Tire, gas companies, car rentals – more product focused associations and organizations that will be looking for ways to grow and support their member operators and customers – to set up a joint promotion campaign with a selection of pan-regional itineraries and commissionable packages. Explore similar opportunities with Tourism Ottawa, Tourism Toronto and/or Tourism Montreal</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched joint-promotion campaigns

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Student Tourism Work Program

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
7. Student tourism work program: Work with St. Lawrence College, Queens University to identify and match students with businesses in the RTO9 region seeking talent as part of a summer/fall tourism recovery season	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RTO9 (lead) St. Lawrence College, Queens College (co-lead) DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program with St. Lawrence College, Queens College

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Cruise Impact Plan

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
8. Cruise impact plan: Understand potential impact of failing cruise line business to determine impact on tourism business in RTO9 - potentially identify ways of working with cruise business to support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cruise impact report •

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Local Tourism Transportation Impact Plan

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
<p>9. Local tourism transportation impact plan: Determine whether there will be a transportation gap due to social distancing among internal transport providers such as taxis and ride-sharing organizations. Potentially promote rental car/ motorcycle/motor coach opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intra-destination transport report and plan

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Tourism Program Training

Initiative	Timeframe	Responsibility	Outcome(s)
10. Tourism program training: Look into providing training support to tourism organizations through online sources (e.g., online courses, webinars, Tourism HR Canada – to-be-launched’ COVID-19 recovery Toolkit etc.) to ensure labour (existing and new) is providing services that are up to the required standards and quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-4 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTO9 (lead) • DMO partners (support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training taken by majority of SMEs



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