

New rules to spur rush for passports

Passport Canada expects 5.2 million applications by March 31, 2009, to comply with new U.S. rule

July 21, 2008

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THE CANADIAN PRESS

OTTAWA—The federal government is predicting a record surge in passport applications over the next year as Canadians get ready for tougher U.S. border rules.

Passport Canada is bracing for 5.2 million passport applications for the year, ending March 31, 2009, a jump of 10 per cent over the previous fiscal year when a record high number of passports was issued, an internal document shows.

The projection is based on a revamped formula that takes into account so-called "pulses," or changes in demand driven by significant events, such as the U.S. Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

The initiative requires Canadians to present passports when travelling in the United States. Previously, Canadians could show birth certificates and other documents but, as of January, last year, you needed a passport to travel by air.

Travellers by land and water will need passports as of June 1 next year, a requirement expected to drive Passport Canada applications to record levels because most Canadians travel to the U.S. by car.

The agency has been caught flat-footed in the past, with faulty projections resulting in long lineups and wait times – and panicky travellers.

The auditor general reported last year, for example, that Passport Canada expected to issue just 3.8 million passports in 2008-2009, a number that now appears to have been off by more than a million.

In the year that ended March 31, 2008, the agency issued 4.8 million passports, a whopping 32 per cent more than the year before.

Once the impact of phase 2 of the initiative passes, application levels are projected to drop significantly below five million for the following three years, says a June 2008 forecast obtained by The Canadian Press under the Access to Information Act.

Passport Canada hired 1,448 workers in 2007-08 to handle the crush and to help meet service standards of two weeks for a walk-in application and four weeks for a mail-in.

In the meantime, the agency has launched a \$1.1-million summer ad campaign to encourage Canadians to send in their applications now to avoid the rush before the final phase of the initiatives.

A January survey of 4,000 Canadians found that one in every two people without a passport planned to apply for one over the following 12 months.

"Even if intentions are overstated ... findings suggest there will still be millions of Canadians renewing and/or applying for a passport in the coming year," says the poll conducted by Ekos Research Associates for Passport Canada.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's budget this year announced plans for a higher-security electronic passport, with a 10-year expiry date, double the five-year expiry in effect now.

The new document, in the works for several years, will look similar to the current blue booklet, but a tamper-resistant microchip embedded in it will hold personal data.

It's not clear how the new passport, to be issued in 2011, will affect workloads at Passport Canada.

Applications must be accompanied by an \$87 fee, although the auditor general recently questioned how part of the fee is set. Foreign Affairs agreed to review the figure this year.