

# 1.4: "ESCAPING" TO RURAL CANADA DURING THE PANDEMIC

PREPARED FOR THE  
CANADIAN  
RURAL  
REVITALIZATION  
FOUNDATION

## RURAL INSIGHTS SERIES: COVID-19

THE INFORMATION INCLUDED HERE IS A SUMMARY OF CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN RURAL CONTEXTS. THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE WILL EVOLVE AS ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION AND RESEARCH IS CONDUCTED, SO CONTINUOUS REVIEW OF REPUTABLE SOURCES AND WEBSITES IS ADVISED.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT THE CANADIAN RURAL REVITALIZATION FOUNDATION AT [WWW.CRRF.CA](http://WWW.CRRF.CA)



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### **DISCLAIMER:**

The information included here is a summary of current knowledge about COVID-19 and its implications in rural contexts. The state of knowledge will evolve as additional investigation and research is conducted, so continuous review of reputable sources and websites is advised.

This report presents a high-level overview of areas of interest to key stakeholders and members of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation and should be read as an exploration of challenges and opportunities that communities might consider as they consider their own unique circumstances.

Given the broad nature of the issues considered for this paper, individual communities and/or economic development professionals should take this paper as a preliminary starting point for their own investigations and planning processes. As such, this paper does not constitute specific recommendations for individual communities, and neither the authors nor the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation may not be held liable for any actions taken in response to this paper.

## ABOUT THE CANADIAN RURAL REVITALIZATION FOUNDATION

The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation ([www.crrf.ca](http://www.crrf.ca)) is a national charity that contributes to the revitalization and sustainability of rural Canada through collaborative research for rural leaders in the community, private sector, and in all levels of government. CRRF works to create credible insights and to improve our understanding of issues and opportunities that are of common interest to rural residents across Canada. Knowledge and better understanding are the fundamental pillars for the welfare of rural communities and environments.

You can follow CRRF online at the links below and join in the conversation on social media by using the hashtags #ruralcan, #COVID19Rural, and #RuralInsights.



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# **“ESCAPING” TO RURAL CANADA DURING THE PANDEMIC**

## **KEY MESSAGES**

- Rural areas may face challenges related to health care capacity and supply chain management, which could be exacerbated by an influx of non-permanent residents.
- Non-permanent residents are contributing members of many rural communities and may be particularly important for rural economies.
- Clear lines of communication should be established between rural municipalities and non-permanent residents in order to communicate directives and expectations and to support decisions related to movement to and from rural areas.
- Public/Regional health bodies are important for disseminating information to permanent and non-permanent residents. In all cases, actions and decisions should be informed by directives from provincial health authorities and local/regional health organizations when available.

# INTRODUCTION

Rural Canada is important in many ways to our social, political, cultural, and economic systems. However, rural areas have long been miscategorized by urban decision makers as either places of production (i.e., agriculture, energy, natural resources) or places of leisure and recreation (i.e., conservation areas, vacation properties, experiential tourism), despite their existence as being home to complex communities with their own unique socio-economic dynamics. Unfortunately, during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, rural places across Canada have faced the challenge of balancing their own needs against increasing pressures arising from urban flight. This conflict has been exacerbated by timing - as the pandemic continues into the summer months, some Canadians are increasingly looking to seasonal properties as means for escaping densely populated urban centres. Quite literally, these non-permanent residents are looking to following social distancing directives where it is easier to do so. While distance and space are fundamental to how we define and understand rural places, in the current context, issues related to class, agency, and capacity have come to the forefront as rural citizens fear for the potential impacts of influxes of non-permanent residents during the pandemic. That is, while some people see an abundance of rural space as an opportunity, rural residents may see each individual taking this opportunity as a threat to the health and wellbeing of their community.

More concretely, rural residents are worried about the ability of their local grocery stores and essential service providers to meet demand while dealing with challenges in local, regional, and national supply chains. They are also concerned about the capacity of limited rural health care systems to meet the demand for testing, monitoring, contact tracing, as well as caring for sick patients on top of the regular primary care.

While these issues are not unique to rural areas, they are compounded by the seasonal nature of many rural economies and the timing of the lockdown directives. While many people were headed to rural places at the end of March when the lockdown was beginning, most seasonal operations were unprepared given that heavier flows of traffic might not typically begin until later in May (in many regions, Victoria Day weekend signifies the unofficial "start of summer"). Tourism, in one way or another, is an important part of rural economies across Canada. Cottages, cabins, camps, second/summer homes, resorts, and campgrounds - dwellings which might not be considered primary places of residence are scattered throughout rural and remote regions from Vancouver Island to Labrador to the Mackenzie Delta.

These issues are also complicated by the existing tensions and ambiguities that exist within urban-rural social relations. Many rural areas have longstanding trust issues with higher levels of government (who are not perceived as understanding or empathetic towards rural issues) and often do not view non-permanent residents as authentic community members. Although non-permanent residents are an important part of many rural communities, sometimes they may not have an understanding of rural ways of life - particularly in the off season. Issues such as access to social services and health care in rural areas can be difficult and this isn't experienced the same way by permanent and

non-permanent residents. Further, interpersonal aspects of rural-urban linkages makes it extremely difficult to provide clear, black-and-white directives when there are many people who don't fit neatly into the permanent-non-permanent resident dichotomy (e.g., snowbirds, people returning to rural communities to provide support or care for at-risk family members, people who may live in an urban centre but work remotely, etc).

## IMPACTS OF “ESCAPING” TO RURAL AREAS

Despite clear directives from governments to “stay home” and “shelter in place,” it became clear in many areas, that some non-permanent residents were choosing to migrate to seasonal residences, cottages, and/or second homes to wait out the lockdown. In extreme cases, people left cities in search of remote places where they might escape and hideout away from the risks inherent in crowded cities (see [this report](#) of a couple driving from Quebec to a remote Indigenous community in the Yukon).

These trends produced many tensions and concerns. These included perceived breaches of trust, strains on interpersonal relationships between rural and non-permanent residents, strains on business relationships between cottage owners and rural service providers, rising us vs them sentiment, and ostracization between rural residents for accepting family members from urban areas. These tensions were compounded by some high profile incidents including Justin Trudeau’s [visit to Rideau Cottage](#) and Ontario Premier Doug Ford’s [secret trip to his family cottage](#) in Muskoka to “check on the plumbing.” Many rural residents perceived these events as disrespectful and hypocritical given that they took place during clear directives to remain in your primary places of residence. However, these responses were likely linked to or informed by existing tensions and conflicts between permanent and non-permanent rural residents.

Many sectors of rural economies will undoubtedly feel the impacts of these directives and reduced flows of people to these areas in both the near future and the longterm. The full extent of these impacts may not be realized for several seasons. COVID-19 directives and restrictions have created a break in normal cycles of social and economic practices. As alluded to by other reports in [CRRF’s Rural Insight Series on COVID-19](#), it remains unseen which practices we will return to and which we will replace. These shifts may have serious implications for rural economies.

## RESPONSES

A variety of responses have been enacted at the provincial, regional, and local levels in order to address the tensions surrounding the “escape to rural” either explicitly or as part of broader efforts to flatten the curve.

- At the **provincial/territorial level**, many provinces set up check points on their borders in attempts to limit unnecessary interprovincial travel. Provincial governments (at first) also provided clear directives that individuals and families should not plan or attempt to spend their period of social isolation in rural areas if their primary place of residence is not located there. As restrictions were loosened at different times, these directives changed in their respective provinces (e.g., campgrounds and vacation cabins were [re-opened in Manitoba](#) on May 4th).
- At the **regional level**, health units and regional health organizations have appealed to seasonal residents to not come to rural areas. Often, these appeals clearly cited [issues related to health care capacity](#) and the inability cope with an influx of people needing care. Regional governments have called for [closures of campgrounds and the closure or interprovincial borders to non-essential travel](#). In some provinces, regional strategies for re-opening are being employed.
- At the **local level**, many municipal councils also asked that non-permanent residents avoid travel to their communities. In some cases, municipalities have taken measures to prevent non-permanent residents from arriving. These include a ban on [visiting second homes](#) and issuing directives to utility providers to [not provide services like turning on water](#) to seasonal residences.
- **At the individual level, non-permanent residents** have also responded to these directives in a variety of ways. While undoubtedly many have made responsible decisions, some have quietly made their way to seasonal residences with stocks of supplies. In many cases, concerns about the need to protect and/or maintain properties have been raised. In extreme examples, some have asserted their rights as property owners and suggested they might withhold tax payments. In some cases seasonal residents have also stepped up and made [substantial donations](#) to support rural communities in this difficult time. Regional tourist/cottager associations, for the most part, have also been working diligently to translate directives into actions, which are both safe and respectful for all parties involved.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Rural municipalities and governments need to develop and maintain clear lines of communications with all (permanent and non-permanent) residents in order to deliver directives (e.g., regarding distancing, limiting contact with others, acquiring supplies, etc.) as well as hear concerns. This may be achieved by creating structures (e.g., a sub-committee or task force) to manage this ongoing process. Various channels of communication should be clearly engaged (e.g., mail outs, web pages, digital communications, etc.) to ensure that directives are clear, that updates can be provided as they come available, and that questions and concerns can be heard. While many communities have embraced citizen-led or community social media pages (which have served a variety of functions), these approaches should be engaged as part of a strategy that is strategic and accessible to all.

- Organizations who represent seasonal residents (e.g., cottagers associations) might develop clear positions on both the rights and responsibilities of their membership. These organizations might also consider how they can work with local service providers to address concerns about property protection and maintenance and reduce the “need” for travel to and from rural places in these circumstances.
- Individuals should follow directives provided by municipalities and health authorities (e.g., regarding physical distancing, limiting contact with others, acquiring supplies, etc.). In cases of concern for property, individuals should consider all options available to them (e.g., seeking out services already existing in the community) and consider not only their individual rights, but also weigh the potential outcomes of their actions for others.
- Wherever possible, governments, organizations, and individuals should make decisions based on credible, local information. The importance of public/regional health bodies and the role they play in disseminating information in rural Canada should not be underestimated in this regard. We should work to mobilize local resources and consider how we can amplify the impact of this credible information in educating the public.
- Moving forward, all parties should consider the growing tensions between permanent and non-permanent residents in rural Canada. The fallout of this pandemic has highlighted a need to re-imagine these relationships and consider how we might use this opportunity build common understanding of rural issues and by extension more cohesive and resilient communities.

## RESOURCES

- FOCA - <https://foca.on.ca/covid-19-update-from-foca/>
- Provincial/regional tourism associations
- Do you have a right to go to the cottage during the pandemic - <https://theconversation.com/ca>
- Provincial public health guideline and local health organization instructions where available.



## RURAL INSIGHTS SERIES: COVID-19

The information included above represents a summary of current knowledge about COVID-19 and its implications for economic resilience and recovery in rural contexts. The state of knowledge will evolve as additional investigation and research is conducted. Continuous review of reputable sources and websites is advised.

CRRF is producing a series of insight reports on key issues impacting rural communities as they face the challenges of managing the pandemic and look to future recovery. CRRF will be publishing reports through the *Rural Insights Series: COVID-19* on a rolling basis throughout 2020. Topics to be covered by these reports include (but are not limited to):

- Agriculture
- Rural Health
- Well-Being & Mental Health
- Employment & the Labour Force
- Local Economic Development
- Immigration
- Digital Divide
- Gender-Based Implications
- Localism & Supply Chains
- Islands
- Tourism
- Fisheries
- Mining
- Manufacturing
- Drinking Water
- Infrastructure Investment

Please visit [www.crrf.ca](http://www.crrf.ca) regularly to access the *Rural Insights Series: COVID-19* as well as updates to emerging research and additional resources on the implications of COVID-19 for rural Canada.