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Ottawa backs down on vaccine mandate for truckers



Canadian big-riggers exempt from impending quarantine rule, border agency says

Christopher Reynolds · The Canadian Press · Posted: Jan 12, 2022 10:20 PM ET | Last Updated: 7 hours ago



U.S.-bound trucks are seen lining up on the Peace Bridge in Fort Erie, Ont., on Oct. 21, 2020. (Frank Gunn/The Canadian Press)

The federal government is backing down from its vaccine mandate for Canadian truckers three days before it was set to take effect.

Ottawa announced in mid-November that truck drivers crossing into Canada would need to be fully vaccinated by this Saturday.

But on Wednesday evening Canada Border Services Agency spokesperson Rebecca Purdy told The Canadian Press that Canadian big-riggers will not have to quarantine if they are unvaccinated or have received only one dose.

The news came as a surprise to Canadian Trucking Alliance president Stephen Laskowski, who says industry representatives met with government officials as recently as midday Wednesday and were told the mandate was still on track for Saturday.

Trade associations on both sides of the border had been pushing for a delay to the restriction, which they say would put additional strain on supply chains amid the latest COVID-19 surge and severe worker shortages.

The new rule will still take effect for American truckers, who will be turned away at the border unless they've been inoculated starting this weekend.

About 10 per cent of the 120,000 Canadian truckers who traverse the border may not have been able to work those routes because they haven't been jabbed, according to the trucking alliance.

Unclear if exemption is temporary

The Canada Border Services Agency declined to say whether the truck drivers' exemption is temporary or indefinite, or what prompted the change.

The vaccine mandate had already started to impact trucking operations.

"There are many of our members who have already said they will not be dispatching unvaccinated drivers across the border," Laskowski said.

Transport companies never opposed the vaccine mandate; "it's the timing of it," he said, citing supply-chain pressure points ranging from clogged ports to sick workers and inflation.

However, the new rule may have encouraged reluctant workers to roll up their sleeves. One Montreal-based logistics company offered a \$10,000 bonus last month to all drivers who received their first vaccine dose by mid-January in the hopes of retaining employees and boosting inoculation rates.

Another, Ontario-based Titanium Transportation Group, which boasts a fleet of 800 tractors, says 95 per cent of its drivers are fully vaccinated.

"More than likely there's no good time, right? They've had this exemption for quite a long time. So maybe this is the right time," CEO Ted Daniel said.

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Nonetheless, myriad trade groups called on Ottawa to postpone the Saturday deadline.

Recent flooding in British Columbia and China's "zero-COVID policy" have added to supply-chain bottlenecks, said the Canadian Manufacturing Coalition in a letter signed by 18 industry association heads, who were asking for a delay. The Petroleum Services Association of Canada said the vaccine mandate will "only aggravate things further."

Food and agricultural products could also have felt the squeeze.

Nearly two-thirds of the roughly \$21 billion in agri-food imports that Canada receives from the United States each year arrives by truck, according to Sylvain Charlebois, a Dalhousie University professor of food distribution and policy. The reliance on U.S. products is especially high in winter.

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