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Tourism industry fears Parks Canada strike

By TOM PETERS Business Reporter

The threat of a summer strike by unionized Parks Canada employees is adding to fears of a further erosion to Atlantic Canada's tourism industry.

With high gas prices, a weak U.S. economy and an election year south of the border — which tends to keep Americans home — a potential strike at popular federal parks and historic sites has tourism people very worried.

"We are very alarmed that the timing of this could be used by the union to negotiate a deal. This would be devastating for us," Darlene Grant Fiander, president of the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia, said Monday.

"Market trends have identified that more and more of our consumers are looking for an authentic, cultural and natural experience," said Susan Tilley-Russell in a release. She is chairwoman of the tourism association.

"The Parks Canada product is crucial to us being able to meet the needs of our visitors in a global tourism industry."

About 5,000 Parks Canada employees across Canada have been without a contract since August 2007, and talks have reached an impasse, says Daniel Kinsella, president of the national component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Mr. Kinsella said Monday the union plans to initiate the conciliation process but is waiting for some information from Parks Canada before it begins the process.

Talks broke off in February when the union walked away from the bargaining table.

"From our perspective the impasse is because they (Parks Canada) didn't really seem like they were ready to get to the point of actually responding to our demands in a substantive way," Mr. Kinsella said.

"We walked out after telling them they needed to respond substantively, and after three days of coming back and focusing on what we absolutely regarded as minutia, we walked out. . . . They may have been actually ready to respond, but we were not getting that."

Aside from a number of monetary issues, Mr. Kinsella said one of the union's priorities is concern about protecting the workers' bargaining unit, which includes issues around contracting out and replacement of permanent workers with students.

He said if nothing is settled and the union arrives at a strike position, striking in the middle of tourism season would obviously have the greatest effect.

Michel Boivin, Parks Canada executive director, said Monday the union "has been invited

back to the table and we hope they accept to come back. We wish to resume negotiations."

Mr. Boivin was not specific on issues but said "some of their demands fall well outside the norm of industry trends, their monetary demands amongst other things.

"The union bargaining team walked away from the table before we at Parks Canada could table our own responses."

He said Parks Canada recognizes "the negative impact a potential strike would have on the tourism industry, but also on our employees, stakeholders and partners and not to mention the Canadian public. So, again, this is why we hope they will choose to return to negotiations so we can table our response."

Gerald Begg of Atlantic Cruise Ship Services, which organizes shore excursions for cruise ship passengers, said a strike would have a significant impact on his business.

"Based on 2007 figures, approximately 30 per cent to 35 per cent of our guests on cruise ships touched a Parks Canada site in some fashion by way of paid admissions, whether it was Citadel Hill or Fortress Louisbourg or Green Gables or Gros Morne," he said.

"Ships going into St. Anthony, Newfoundland, for example, purposely go for L'Anse aux Meadows (national historic site). While I don't think it (strike) will stop the ships from coming, it will certainly have an impact on shore excursion revenue, which impacts on revenue of the cruise lines," he said.

Statistics for 2007 show an annual increase in visitation at a number of Parks Canada sites. Research posted on visitation to national parks and historic sites in Nova Scotia indicate there were 1,320,214 person visits.

(tpeters@herald.ca)

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