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Gas pains may cramp N.S. tourism

Operators brace for 'hit'

By BRUCE ERSKINE Business Reporter

Escalating fuel costs are forcing tourism operators in southwestern Nova Scotia to focus on the domestic market, says the general manager of Destination Southwest Nova Association.

"We know we are going to get a hit," Madonna Spinazola said in an interview Wednesday when asked if higher fuel prices will reduce the number of American visitors to the province this year.

"There's no question it's going to have an impact on the tourism season this year."

Her concerns mirror those of Randy Williams, chief executive officer of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, who said this week that projected gas prices of \$1.30 to \$1.40 a litre this summer will hurt the industry as people reduce the distances they travel by car.

Mr. Williams also suggested that higher fuel costs will translate into higher fuel surcharges for tourists travelling by plane, train or bus.

Ms. Spinazola said Destination Southwest Nova Association, an amalgamation of the Evangeline Trail, South Shore and Yarmouth County tourism associations, is involved in a number of marketing efforts to counter those trends.

The new association wants to educate tourists about the many attractions in the region and encourage them to extend their stays there.

"We've got the product," she said, noting that the association is staging a tourism trade show at the Holiday Inn Harbourview in Dartmouth on Saturday between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The show will include more than 40 regional exhibitors.

Ms. Spinazola said the aim of the trade show is to demonstrate that tourists don't have to travel far to see the wide range of attractions available in southwestern Nova Scotia.

"Southwest Nova Scotia has 40 per cent of . . . the tourism product in Nova Scotia," she said.

She noted features like the region's beaches, its high tides and its numerous annual events, including the Apple Blossom Festival in Kentville and the Mahone Bay Classic Boat Festival.

"It's a nice circle," she said. "There's a wide variety of experiences in a relatively small geographic area."

The association is also involved in a number of provincial marketing initiatives, including the visit of Bluenose II and three tall ships to the Toronto waterfront in June and a recent tourism marketing trip to Boston.

Ms. Spinazola said Bay Ferries, operators of the Cat ferry that runs from Yarmouth to Portland and Bar Harbor, Me., is helping promote the region by bringing media consultants to the area in late May.

The media consultants will stay in different resorts and hotels and write about their experiences.

Darlene Grant Fiander, president of the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia, said rising fuel prices are a concern but probably won't be the sole determining factor in how people spend their tourism dollars.

"People are looking for experiences," she said, noting that gas prices have been going up for years but haven't hurt the RV industry. "Cost is a factor, but it's not a deal breaker."

Ms. Grant Fiander said higher gas prices may actually be good for Nova Scotia's tourism sector, which relies mainly on the regional market, since it might make Atlantic Canadians reconsider trips outside the region.

Growth in the province's \$1.3-billion tourism industry has been flat for the past few years and Ms. Grant Fiander said the numbers for the first quarter of this year are down. She said results of an industry-wide survey should be available next week.

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