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Montana's travel industry is already feeling the impact of the coronavirus.

MISSOULA – Thirty-six percent of travel business owners around Montana had already experienced cancellations due to the coronavirus before any confirmed cases existed in Montana. Nearly fifty percent of hotel/motels and other accommodation businesses had cancellations due to the coronavirus as well as 30 percent of outfitters and guides. This is based on a study conducted by the Institute for tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana between March 11th and 13th, before any confirmed cases in Montana.

There were 394 Montana travel-related businesses who responded to the survey within 48 hours, demonstrating a high level of interest and concern within the business community. One reason for Montana business owners to be concerned, are recent estimates from the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), that suggest the global travel sector could shrink by up to 25 percent in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. While Montana's travel industry is largely driven by domestic travel, recent downturns, such as the 2008 recession, have demonstrated that much of domestic travel patterns are in line with global trends.

The majority of Montana's travel related businesses are small with little leeway if they are impacted severely due to the coronavirus, even if the duration of the impact is short. As an industry, the businesses are certainly nervous. Seventy-two percent said that the coronavirus will negatively impact their business, with nearly 70 percent believing it will reduce their

revenues. Similarly, 70 percent say coronavirus will increase the chances of a recession in the U.S.

For many owners, however, there is a 'wait and see' attitude saying it is too early to tell. "Survey me in a couple weeks," say some respondents." This sentiment likely stemmed from the recognition that the virus had yet been detected in Montana and thus uncertainty remained as to the total impact.

While a general concern is evident, those concerns vary by sectors within the industry.

Vacation rentals: "What would negatively affect us the most, is if our housekeepers are infected or are not able to work. Or if one of our guests get sick and infects our house. That would be devastating to us and I guess we would have to cancel upcoming guests. Don't know how to plan for this."

RV campgrounds: "We are booking sites and they are bringing in their own RV's so I'm sure each camper is doing all they can to keep their RV's sanitized and they are less likely to engage people who might have the virus. Most campers use their own facilities."

Hotel/motels: "We're concerned about staffing our hotels due to employees having a cold or being sick. We will ask employees to stay home because of any illness, no matter how minor. We're also concerned about the need to close hotels due to the Coronavirus being confirmed in one of our hotels. If one employee contracts the virus, we may be forced to close the hotel for a few days or a week."

Outfitters/Guides: "Unknowns about airline travel seem to be impacting people's decision to come on a backcountry trip more than going on a remote vacation."

Trying to be on the positive side, one question asked if the businesses were actually getting more bookings because Montana might be perceived as a safe place to visit. At this point, only 10 out of 134 accommodation owners (8%), 3 out of the 111 outfitters and guides (3%), 3 out of 57 tourism service owners (5%), and 3 out of 45 tourism support business (7%) said yes. However, there is still some optimism. One respondent said, "Fresh air and individual

activities should be reassuring that person-to-person transmission is unlikely to occur while enjoying Montana's outdoors.”

According to Norma Nickerson, Director of UM's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, “Business owners are scared and there is so much unknown right now, they simply don't know what to do. There is hope from the travel sector that this will turn around by summer.” As one owner said, “I think we're going to see a lot of last minute/later bookings when coronavirus starts to fizzle out. This might take a few months, but I have a feeling there's going to be a mad rush on travel plans as the season gets closer.”

This preliminary report can be found at

https://tableau.mus.edu/t/missoula/views/BusinessSurveyViz/HowLikely-Dash?%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=n&%3AshowVizHome=n&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y&%3Aembed=y All information and reports published by

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