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*Statement*

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**SPEAKING NOTES**

**FOR**

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WESTERN ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION CANADA**

**ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION  
AND DEVELOPMENT**

***“Skills development and training in a rural  
Canadian context”***

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**Check Against Delivery**

- I am delighted to be here today, and to be part of this discussion about delivering quality education to rural communities.
- Certainly Canada – like many other nations – faces challenges in ensuring all our citizens have access to educational opportunities that will allow both them, and our country, to reach their full potential.
- But before discussing some of the initiatives the Government of Canada has undertaken in pursuit of that goal, I'd like to provide the context for the federal government's involvement in education.

- The Government of Canada recognizes that “*talented, creative people are a critical contributor to a successful national economy*” ... and our long-term strategic plan – *Advantage Canada* – has set a bold, but achievable, goal to create the best-educated, most-skilled and most flexible workforce in the world.
- However, in Canada, the delivery of formal education falls within the authority of provincial and territorial governments. Each jurisdiction has developed its own educational structures and institutions at the primary, secondary and post-secondary levels, creating 13 similar – but not identical – education systems.

- Although there is no federal department of education and no integrated national system of education, the Government of Canada does retain some responsibility for traditional education ... directly, by providing services to military personnel and First Nations peoples living on reserves, and indirectly through the transfer of funds to provinces and territories for education.
- The federal government also plays a strong role in less traditional areas of education – specifically skills development and other forms of training – and it is this kind of initiative my presentation will focus on.

- Federally, the primary mandate for training lies with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, which delivers programs directly – and through Labour Market Development Agreements with each province – that enable Canadians to prepare for, find and keep employment.
- However, several other departments within the federal government are also engaged in skills development ... in part because of the unique challenges Canada faces in delivering these kinds of programs.

- With 32.2 million people spread over nearly ten million square kilometers, we're one of the least densely populated countries in the world. Many of our communities are not only rural, but often remote as well.
- A second key Canadian characteristic is our diversity ... culturally, linguistically, geographically and economically. It's a factor the Government of Canada must take into account in every initiative it undertakes. A single, uniform approach could never hope to be effective in responding to the vast range of realities that exist from coast to coast.

- Canada's regional development agencies are one of the ways Canada responds to that diversity. My department of Western Economic Diversification Canada – WD, for short – works to respond to western Canada's unique economic challenges and opportunities. Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency responds to these challenges in the four Atlantic Provinces while the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec fulfills a similar role in Quebec.

- In collaboration with partners – including other levels of government, academic and research institutions, community organizations and the private sector – WD works to develop and diversify the western Canadian economy by supporting a wide range of initiatives targeting three inter-related strategic priorities ...
  - Innovation ... to diversify the West's highly resource-based economy by strengthening the knowledge-based and value-added sectors;
  - Entrepreneurship ... to enhance Western Canada's small business sector, which accounts for nearly 80 per cent of all new jobs in the region;

- And community economic development ... to create new employment opportunities that allow communities across the West to thrive, regardless of their size or location.
  
- In addition to the department's three strategic priorities, WD plays a strong role in policy, advocacy and coordination.
  
- Through research and policy development, the department builds knowledge and understanding of western issues and their impact on western competitiveness and quality of life.

- And there is no question that skilled labour shortages are a very real challenge across the region.
- For the past several years, the western Canadian economy has been experiencing a period of strong growth that has created an extremely tight labour market. In fact, some have quipped that – from the number of signs – a visitor could easily think “help wanted” is the region’s largest franchise.
- As a result, WD frequently receives requests to fund skills development, training and apprenticeship projects. But we need to consider our involvement in such projects very carefully.

- For WD to consider providing financial support to training and skills development initiatives, projects must:
  - Be consistent with our economic mandate,
  - Respond to a specific skills shortage,
  - Require WD's involvement in order to proceed,
  - And, it must not duplicate programs offered by other government departments or non-governmental organizations.

- In addition to the federal and provincial departments that provide skills training, Western Canada is home to many excellent universities, colleges, technical institutes that offer a vast range of programs.
- However, the majority of these are located in urban communities ... which can present a barrier for rural residents, and for certain segments of the population with lower economic participation rates.

- For example, about 63% of Canada's Aboriginal population lives in the West. As one of the youngest and fastest growing segments of the Canadian population, they represent a tremendous opportunity ... both to improve quality of life and to increase Western Canada's productivity.
- That is where WD can – and does – play a role.
- By funding training and skill building initiatives that fill critical gaps in the system, we help rural residents and other under-represented groups become full participants in the workforce.

- I'd like to discuss two different approaches WD has used to meet this need ... the first where the training opportunity is brought to rural residents physically, and a second where it is delivered virtually.
- As an example of the physical delivery of training, WD provided funding to Red River College in the province of Manitoba to purchase two 55-foot trailers that can be transported anywhere in the province.
- Each trailer transforms, within minutes, into a 1,000 square foot self-contained training unit, with power provided by diesel generator.

- Additional trailers – carrying materials, supplies, training aids, tools and equipment – accompany the training unit, allowing the College to deliver training for trades – such as automotive service technician, carpentry, electrical, machining, pipe fitting, plumbing and welding – right in the community where the skills are needed.
- And, once the students have completed their training, the labs can be moved to the next community where trained workers are required.

- This delivery method has two significant advantages. First, it allows students to complete apprenticeship programs right in their own community, even when a permanent trade facility cannot be justified by demand or cost.
- Second, local skills training can be customized to meet the specific needs of a community, offering a way of engaging workers who might not otherwise have the means or opportunity to participate.
- The second example uses a different delivery method – the Internet – to achieve similar results.

- Canada already ranks as one of the most connected countries in the world, and a National Satellite Initiative is expanding access even further ... to remote and northern communities, where satellite is the only practical means of providing broadband access.
- Information technology has tremendous potential ... bridging the distance between communities to make amenities and opportunities more available ... including e-commerce, tele-health and, of course, distance learning.

- In the province of Alberta, for instance, WD provided funding to create the Entrepreneurship Learning Centre, a video conferencing network that provides business information and interactive training opportunities to the province's small business community.
- The network electronically connects all of the Alberta partners in WD's Business Service Network, providing 33 locations across the province where people can participate in seminars, obtain advice and receive business program information by attending videoconferences hosted by their local office.

- Video conferencing allows participants to take part in meetings and training sessions without being in the same physical location.
- Presenters can interact with all locations and use a PowerPoint presentation as they would in a face-to-face meeting ... and students can ask questions and enter into discussions with other participants in real time.
- Since it was established in 2004, about 14,000 small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs have participated in video conferencing events hosted by the Entrepreneurship Learning Centre ... and the concept has now expanded to the province of Manitoba.

- The examples I've provided today are just two of the skills training initiatives WD has supported, but I believe they provide a good overview ... not only of what we fund, but also why.
- As a government department focused on economic development, we recognize that a skilled workforce is critical to economic growth and productivity.
- By supporting targeted programs to strengthen the skills of western Canadians, Western Economic Diversification Canada is contributing to a stronger West and a stronger Canada.
- Thank you.