

Reinventing Passport Canada

For 15 months beginning in November 2006, Passport Canada faced a crisis that some called "the perfect storm"—a test of its ability to cope, adapt and innovate while under pressures outside its control. The agency emerged a stronger organization.

By Bethany Campbell and Steve MacSween

When the United States announced its Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) in 2004, Passport Canada knew a significant change was looming: Canadians' traditional ability to enter the U.S. without a passport was coming to an end. But after the initial impact of the news, not much happened.

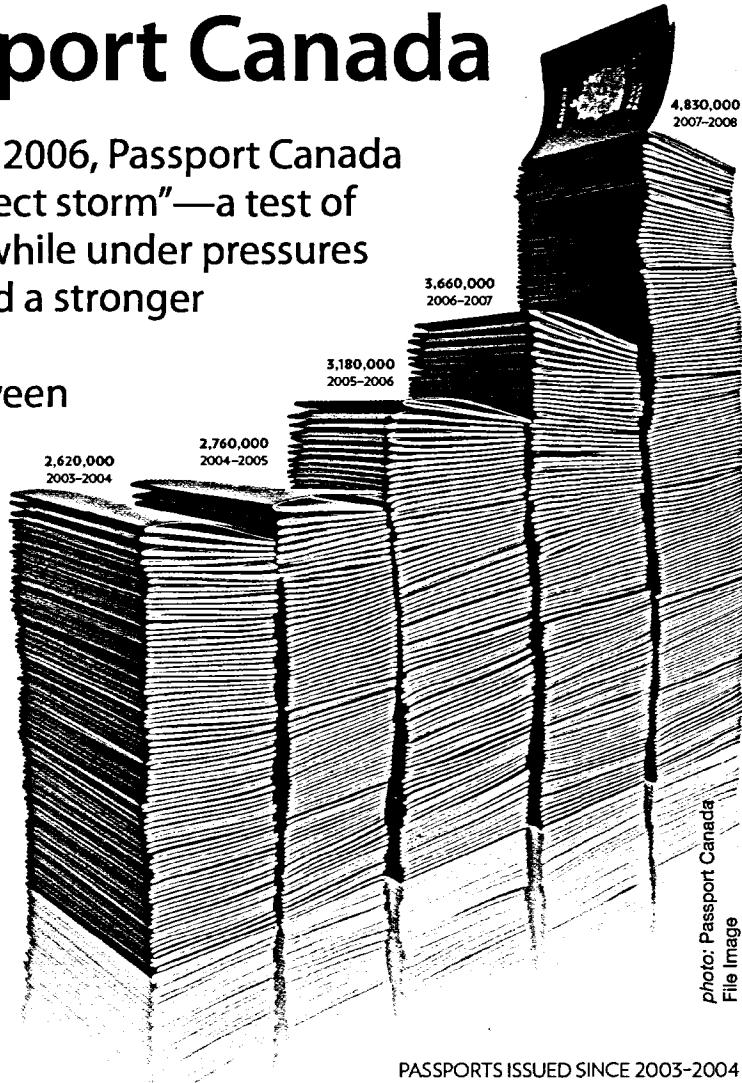
It wasn't until November 22, 2006, that the U.S. published its first firm notice about implementing the WHTI. The initial stage would require Canadian citizens flying to, over or from the U.S. to present a valid Canadian passport or NEXUS card, (a joint U.S.-Canada ID program for frequent travellers). The change would take effect January 23, 2007.

Passport Canada—and Canadian travellers—had about two months' warning of the most important change in the history of border relations between Canada and the U.S. Those who would need a passport to travel to the U.S. by air had only 60 days to get one. Compounding Passport Canada's problem was a rush of media coverage that prompted Canadians to react in large numbers.

Passport Canada suddenly found itself engulfed by an overwhelming wave of applications. Although the agency had prepared contingency measures to deal with increased volume, they based them on predictions of a 6.6 percent rise. The actual surge was a staggering 22 percent.

In September 2006, the agency received 251,000 applications; by the following March, that had soared to 600,000. In the four months between December 2006 and March 2007, Passport Canada handled about the same number of applications it had during an entire year earlier in the decade.

At the time of the WHTI announcement, Passport Canada's service standard for mailed-in applications was 15 days. By March 2007, mail-in processing time had risen to 43 days.



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A Passport Canada employee serves a client at the Gatineau passport office.

The new Passport Canada central mail-in processing facility in Gatineau