**Liberals look to tourism to fuel growth outside of Canada’s big cities**

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The federal government is launching a tourism strategy that not only aims to bring more foreign visitors to Canada, but also to get tourists to visit a greater variety of destinations and to attract more of them outside of the peak summer season.

To be announced by Tourism Minister Mélanie Joly on Tuesday, the strategy aims to create 54,000 new jobs by 2025 and to see the tourism sector outpace the rest of the economy in terms of growth.

The government is emphasizing its increasing involvement in tourism with five months to go to the next election as the Liberals are hoping to convince communities across the country – especially outside of big cities – that they are delivering on their promise to fuel economic growth.

However, with a budget of $58-million over two years, the strategy hinges on the participation of the private sector as well as additional investments from federal agencies that are not currently involved heavily in the sector, such as Export Development Canada.

“Canada’s tourism sector is a high-growth, high-potential opportunity and is at a crossroads: Either it settles for business as usual, and risks steadily losing ground, or it sets the bar higher with aggressive targets and mobilizes the resources to reach them,” says the strategy, a copy of which was provided to The Globe and Mail ahead of its release.

In an interview, Ms. Joly said there has long been a tendency in Canada and the federal government to “look down” on the tourism industry, or to see it as delivering lower-quality, seasonal jobs.

The federal government already pays for foreign advertising campaigns through Destinations Canada, which receives $95-million a year. In the most recent budget, the government also spent $5-million to promote domestic tourism to Canadians.

Ottawa now wants to start investing more directly in projects and to oversee greater co-ordination between various levels of government and the industry.

“If we don’t structure ourselves, other countries in the world will grab our share of the pie,” Ms. Joly said. “The other phenomenon that can happen is that if Canadian companies don’t invest in the sector and take charge, foreign companies will come in and do it.”

The strategy includes $58-million for tourism projects over two years, as well as the creation of regional “tourism investments groups” and new pan-Canadian advisory group that will aim to improve co-ordination between governments and the private sector.

 “My objective is not just to look at the number of people who come to the country. My objective is to see the extent to which they spend money and generate jobs,” Ms. Joly said. “We don’t want to get into a situation of over-tourism … The goal is to spread out the arrival of tourists into the fall, winter and spring, and to different parts of the country.”

Ms. Joly was put in charge of the tourism portfolio last summer. She said that developing the industry can help communities to diversify their economies, especially in areas that have long been dependent on natural resources.

Canada used to be one of the world’s top 10 destinations, but is now ranked 18th in terms of attracting visitors. Three quarters of the 21 million outside visitors who come to Canada every year visit only Ontario, Quebec and/or British Columbia, and a majority of them never get out of Toronto, Vancouver and/or Montreal.

The government is now targeting five areas for growth in the sector: winter travel, Indigenous tourism, rural experiences, culinary visits and LGBTQ2 visitors.

“People around the world are looking for unique experiences,” Ms. Joly said. “It’s up to us to get organized and allow them to discover what is part of our culture, our traditions and our daily lives.”

According to the federal government, the tourism sector generates $102-billion in annual economic activity, including $22-billion that comes from foreign visitors, and employs 1.8 million Canadians. By 2025, the government hopes that the tourism sector will generate $128-billion in economy activity and employ an additional 54,000 Canadians. Another key goal will be attracting an extra one million foreign visitors outside of the summer season.

The government points to places such as Fogo Island in Newfoundland, Inverness in Nova Scotia, Murdochville in Quebec and Tofino in British Columbia that were able to attract greater numbers of tourists with new and original attractions.