

# 15<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly

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### **Aurora Tourism Industry**

**MR. RAMSAY:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to speak today about aurora tourism here in the Northwest Territories. In the year 2000, there were over 13,000 Japanese tourists who came to the territory to view our aurora filled night skies. The unprecedented terrorist attacks of September 11th cast a very large shadow over the entire tourism industry throughout North America. The year after the attacks, the number of Japanese visitors had been cut over half, to roughly 6000.

From 2002 to 2005, our numbers showed a steady increase to just over 10,000 visitors. Preliminary numbers would suggest that the 2006 numbers will be approximately the same. What is troublesome is that it looks as though the numbers for this season are down substantially from last year.

Mr. Speaker, research would suggest that we do have some competition in the aurora viewing market. Alaska, Yukon and northern Alberta are all showing growth in Japanese visitation. The industry needs and demands the attention of our government to take the necessary action to ensure we stay competitive.

One of the bigger challenges remains: the number of flight connections and difficulty the Japanese visitors experience in getting to the Northwest Territories. Both Whitehorse and Fairbanks have the ability to handle large, fully-loaded charter aircrafts such as the 747 and 767. This certainly gives them an advantage. Now that charters are in play, they have cut the flying time from 20 hours to seven hours to get to Fairbanks. This year seven direct charter flights of 747s will be bringing more than 2200 Japanese visitors to Alaska.

In Yellowknife, we've been talking about extending the runway to handle large charter aircraft for years, but it still remains not a reality. In 2004, the Department of ITI spent \$250,000 on the Aurora Recovery Program, which worked to brand the Northwest Territories as the destination for aurora viewing in Japan. This money was leveraged with CTC money to put almost \$1 million into the branding effort in Japan.

Mr. Speaker, given the fact that competition is getting more noticeable and numbers are down, what is the government's plan to help this industry become more competitive? Tourism 2010 speaks of an additional \$14 million being spent in the marketing of key leisure markets which includes aurora viewing. How realistic is that number? Mr. Speaker, I will have questions for the Minister of ITI at the appropriate time. Mahsi.

--- Applause