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Air Canada puts surcharge into its ads

Follows WestJet; Critics urge Ottawa to enforce advertising rule

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Just as quietly as Air Canada introduced its new fuel surcharge earlier this month, the country's largest carrier changed its policy on advertising it yesterday.

Montie Brewer, Air Canada chief executive, said the airline was aiming to be more "transparent" about its pricing by including details of the fuel surcharge in a series of ads that ran in national newspapers yesterday -- much as its smaller domestic rival WestJet Airlines Ltd. has already been doing.

While the surcharge is not included in the advertised price of tickets, it is clearly detailed in a box beside the advertised price of tickets.

A spokesman for Porter Airlines said the Toronto Island upstart also plans to begin detailing the charge in its advertisements "soon."

Under federal law, Canadian airlines are not obligated to include details of the new fuel charge in their advertisements or the advertised price of a ticket, much as they are not obligated to do so with other airport charges, security fees or taxes. Both Air Canada and Porter had originally said they would not include details of the surcharge in their ads.

That lack of transparency prompted calls by consumer groups and politicians for the federal government to act on an amendment, passed last summer, that would force Canadian airlines to include "all fees, charges, and taxes" in the advertised price of a ticket.

When the amendment received royal assent last June, no fixed date was attached, allowing Transport Canada time to co-ordinate its implementation between the federal government, which regulates airline advertising, and the provincial governments, which regulate advertisements from travel agents.

Liberal transportation critic Joe Volpe submitted a motion last week, which will be voted on as early as Tuesday, to have Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon appear before a federal committee to explain what progress has been made on those efforts.

In the meantime, Michael Janigan, executive director of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, is urging the government to enact the law before the airlines decide it is no longer in their interest to advertise details of the charge.

"The bottom line is people should know what they're paying for," he said.

"All this is simply bait-and-switch advertising with a little bit of a veneer of respectability."

The new fuel surcharges -- which range from \$20 to \$45, depending on the carrier and the distance travelled -- were adopted by Canadian airlines earlier this month to offset the soaring price of fuel and to show customers its impact on the cost of flying.

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