From the moment the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in the middle of March, ferry traffic dropped dramatically, down by as much as 75 to 80% across the system within a matter of weeks. Traffic hasn’t been that low since the early 1980’s.

We’re fortunate that traffic is beginning to return – we’re still down significantly, but by about 30% on average across our routes now. With the Province easing travel restrictions, we’re expecting traffic to continue to grow over the summer months.

Depending on the course the pandemic takes, we may recover to near-2019 levels within a few years. What we are experiencing with COVID-19 is unprecedented, and there’s simply no play book to follow. So, we’re taking a cautious and measured approach as we make each decision.

What we do know is that we need to protect the core of the ferry system and continue to provide safe, reliable service to British Columbians. To do this, we’re putting the bulk of our efforts into bringing back service. We want island communities to know we are behind them, and we understand the value to them of the lifeline services we provide. We are also behind our employees, and we have been doing everything we can to keep them healthy and safe.

Over the last few months, BC Ferries has been working closely with the provincial government to examine the impact COVID-19 is having on the ferry system. The actions we are discussing put safety at the forefront and protect the health and safety of our customers and employees. These actions will also address the health of the overall ferry system.

This summer, we are going to need your help, your patience and your understanding.

You likely know we’ve taken a number of steps to make ferry travel safe, including extra cleaning and putting up physical barriers wherever possible to maintain physical distancing. We also worked with the ferry industry and Transport Canada to ensure our customers can remain in their vehicles, regardless of which deck you’re on. You are required to travel with a face covering for everyone over the age of two, and we ask you to wear it whenever you can’t physically distance yourself from passengers and crew.

Over the past month or so, we’ve revised our schedules more often than normal, as we bring more sailings back into service. I know this has impacted some of our customers, but every time we add more sailings, we need to revise the schedules one more time.
For customers phoning into the call centre, the wait time may be longer until we get all schedule changes sorted out. All of our employees are working their hardest to make your travel experience with us the best it can be during our new normal.

While we’re adding sailings as fast as we can, there still will be some sailing limitations this summer as we weren’t able to hire and train summer seasonal staff in March and April due to COVID-19. We are planning for summer service to exceed demand, but we won’t have the same number of sailings as last summer.

Please arrive at the terminal earlier than usual because screening protocols take extra time. Sailings at our most popular times may be full, resulting in sailing waits for customers that are travelling without an advanced booking. On routes with reservations, consider booking in advance to travel on the sailing of your choice, or if you have flexibility in your schedule, please travel at less busy times of the day. This helps us even out traffic throughout the day and makes it a better and more enjoyable experience for everyone.

In addition to more sailings, we’ve brought back some limited hot food services on our major routes. We encourage you to take the packaged meals back to your vehicle or to an outside deck, as we will have limited seating in our cafeterias. The more we can all adhere to physical distancing, the safer we all will be. For health reasons, the Buffets, SeaWest Lounges and Salad Bars will remain closed for the rest of the year.

We’ve also reopened retail service on board, and the Quays at Tsawwassen and Nanaimo terminals.

Without a doubt, these have been challenging times. In the words of Dr. Bonnie Henry, we will get through them together by being kind, being calm and being safe.

We know that waiting in line-ups and missed sailings can be stressful. During frustrating moments, our staff are here to help. They have worked hard for you during the pandemic, so please show them the respect they have earned. BC Ferries is committed to a harassment and abuse free worksite for our employees. We ask for your patience at all times.

BC Ferries is prepared for the challenges that lie ahead. We know our company has an important role to play in British Columbia’s economic and social recovery, and we are taking that responsibility seriously. We will continue to focus on connecting our customers and coastal communities and supporting cargo operators to deliver goods to island communities. We will help you get to work and to appointments, and we will connect you to the people and places important in your lives.