

Aboriginal Business in Alberta Shines

By Kelly Nippard

February 27, 2001 was an exciting day for business in Alberta, but especially exciting for Aboriginal business.



A large group from Pimee Well Servicing Ltd. proudly accept the Eagle Feather Business Award of Distinction from Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Robert Nault. Pictured, left to right, are Eugene Badger, Chief John Shirt, Chief Morris Monias, Minister Nault, Chief Thomas Abraham, Chief Eric Gadwa, Tim Schultz and Sandy Jackson.

For the first time, Aboriginal business in Alberta was honored at the annual Alberta Chambers of Commerce Business Awards of Distinction. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) sponsored two awards, the Eagle Feather Business Award of Distinction and the INAC/AWPI Aboriginal Relations – Best Practice Award of Distinction.

Both awards were presented by the Honourable Robert Nault, Minister of INAC, during an elegant evening ceremony. The ceremony, organized annually by the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, also included presentations of 11 additional Business Awards of Distinction.

The Eagle Feather Business Award of Distinction recognizes a First Nations-owned business that demonstrates outstanding achievement and incorporates entrepreneurial and cultural concepts into its operation.

It was presented to Pimee Well Servicing Ltd., a business located in Bonnyville.

Pimee, a Cree word meaning “oil,” is owned by six First Nations: Heart Lake, Frog Lake, Saddle Lake, Kehewin, Beaver Lake and Whitefish Lake. With four oilwell service rigs and the recent purchase of Tarsands Steam-cleaning Ltd, Pimee takes advantage of Alberta’s rich oil

economy. As well, it boasts an Aboriginal workforce of 95 per cent.

The two other worthy nominees were Peace Hills Trust Company, located in Edmonton, and RKM Logging Ltd., located in High Level.

The INAC/AWPI Aboriginal Relations – Best Practice Award of Distinction recognizes businesses that demonstrate outstanding achievements in partnering with Aboriginal business, particularly in the areas of employment and training.

It was presented to Flint Energy Services Ltd., a business located in Sherwood Park, that provides general oilfield construction, electrical and instrumentation services, road building, pipeline construction and much more. Over the past few years, Flint has established many relationships with Aboriginal communities by hiring local Aboriginal people for their projects, creating a win-win situation for the company and the communities.

The two other worthy nominees were Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries, located in Boyle and Syncrude Canada Ltd., located in Fort McMurray.

For information on the Alberta Business Awards of Distinction, please visit the Alberta Chambers of Commerce website at www.abchamber.ab.ca.



Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Robert Nault poses with representatives from Flint Energy Services Ltd., who received the INAC/AWPI Aboriginal Relations – Best Practice Award of Distinction. Pictured, left to right, are Charles Iggulden, Tom Erasmus, Andy Collins, Minister Nault and Stephen Smith.

Driftpile Wildland Fire Fighting Unit: All Fired Up

By Terry Lusty

Due to extremely dry winters over the past couple of years, forest fires continue to plague Alberta. Some fires start burning in spring and do not fizzle out until late summer or early fall. Last year, they continued into the month of October and, in 1999, the fires burned right into December.

Driftpile First Nation, situated between Slave Lake and High Prairie, decided to take a unique approach to economic development and capitalized on this destructive aspect of nature by establishing Driftpile Wildland Fire Fighting Unit.



“Although the First Nation has been fighting fires since the late 1970s, it didn’t become Driftpile Wildland Fire Fighting Unit until 1997 when it was taken over by Driftpile Band Enterprises,” said Peter Freeman, Director of Capital Management and Economic Development for Driftpile.

The First Nation always has at least two squads of 80 firefighters trained and ready to jump into action by the time fire season begins in the spring. When fires threaten larger areas, additional squads, composed of eight men each, can be summoned to respond immediately.

All crew members are required to have a minimum of Type 3 training, which tests strength, endurance and physical conditioning.

“They have to be able to pull their own weight or things could very easily fall apart,” said Freeman.

The crews must be able to communicate quickly with 160 others, relay changing work conditions and have the skills to adapt to various situations.

Crews are on 24-hour call during fire seasons and are eligible for standby pay.

If workers are in camp, however, and

there are no fires, they perform other tasks such as providing wood for campsites, cleaning up areas or planting trees. Planting trees involves thinning out new growth areas where evergreen trees have reached a five to 10-foot height and need adequate spacing to survive.

If they choose, members can upgrade their training to Type 2 and/or Type 1.

The Type 2 leadership training is a week-long course at Hinton’s Forestry Technology School and focuses on administration, writing reports and assigning equipment. After completion, the member is able to oversee a crew of eight.

Type 1 training is more advanced. It provides firefighters with the expertise required of crew bosses and related administrative positions.

Health, understandably, is always of concern and each member must pass a medical examination every year to qualify. Some people, explains Freeman, fight fires for years and are fine, but suddenly they could be asthmatic and ineligible to work.

With many years of experience behind them, there is much promise for Driftpile Fire Fighting Unit. The First Nation successfully negotiated a three-year deal this past winter and are all geared up to fight fires this spring.

FOR RENT: North Peace Rental Equipment

By Trina Gobert

Business has been doing very well since Dennis Cloutier forged a partnership with Woodland Cree First Nation.

Cloutier, a Metis from the Peace River area, opened North Peace Rental

Equipment Ltd. in August of 1997. Just two years later, he partnered with Woodland Cree First Nation.

“For myself it was a business decision. I can already see the benefits for the company in being able to expand,” said Cloutier.

“Some of the people and businesses we deal with now were in business with Woodland before our partnership.”

North Peace Rentals provides a wide selection of equipment for rent, including hand tools, bobcats, generators, welding equipment, scaffolding and a wide range of other items. The business also provides repair work for a variety of equipment.

North Peace Rentals owns over \$500,000 in rental equipment.

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Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta – Going Where No One Has Gone Before

By Trina Gobert

Bert Crowfoot is excited.

The founder and CEO of the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta (AMMSA) has recently celebrated the organization's 18th anniversary.

"We were exactly 18 years old on March 18," said Crowfoot.

Since 1983, Crowfoot has been publishing *Windspeaker*, Canada's National Aboriginal news source. Through the years Crowfoot has added provincial papers: *Alberta Sweetgrass*; *Saskatchewan Sage* and *Raven's Eye*. AMMSA also operates CFWE-FM, an Aboriginal radio station covering Alberta and Aboriginal Media Services, which provides advertising services to clients wishing to reach Aboriginal communities.

Although Crowfoot did not plan a big celebration for this year's anniversary he is excited about some major developments taking place for AMMSA. One is a revision of AMMSA's website in March that includes full text articles and complete search functions for all of AMMSA's publications.

"The website is a major project we are working on because we're going back the 18 years. Every single story from every single publication is going into an archive section on the site," said Crowfoot.

"So if anybody wants to research, it will all be there for them. For example, if you're a student and you're researching Burnt Church, you just type in Burnt Church and every single story that goes back the 18 years will be there. But it is going to cost."



*Bert Crowfoot, founder and CEO of the
Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta.*

Fees for usage of the web site will be charged on a daily, monthly or yearly basis but will be structured for multi-users. The site will allow users to register



by submitting their credit card number. They will then receive a personal identification number and password that will allow them to access the archive section of the site.

The current site receives monthly traffic of 51,000 page views but with the revision, it is expected to see a large increase in traffic.

"We will continue to have free sections on the site with the monthly headlines from each publication," said Crowfoot.

"But there is going to be a whole set of areas that you will not be able to access without paying a fee."

Another development is the expansion of CFWE-FM radio that currently serves 54 northern Alberta Aboriginal communities. Crowfoot is looking at installing a 100-kilowatt transmitter on a 400-foot tower out in the Moose Hills area east of St. Paul in September 2001, enabling the station to reach a larger audience.

"We've been working on it for two years and right now all of our radio bingo money is going toward that radio expansion project," said Crowfoot. "I would love to eventually have six of those transmitters around the province so that we can reach way up north and down south."

As Crowfoot continues development of AMMSA he insists that the organization's success is because of its employees.

"One of my philosophies is to surround yourself with good people," said Crowfoot.

"Empower them and get out of their way."

Corporate Alberta and First Nations Meet to Promote Economic Partnership

By Glenn Luff

Private industry and Aboriginal business are working together to strengthen Alberta's economy.

Last October, the Alberta Chambers of Commerce hosted two workshop/breakfasts with the province's Aboriginal business leaders. The workshops were designed to strengthen the business relationship between Aboriginal business and the private sector in Alberta.

"This was a very worthwhile experience for both parties," said Alberta Chambers of Commerce President Al Petersen.

"The Alberta Chambers was most impressed by the breadth of expertise shared among Aboriginal business leaders, as well as their commitment to forging a closer working relationship with the private sector."

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce represents over 20,000 business people at 135 Chambers of Commerce across Alberta. The Chamber holds regular breakfasts in Edmonton and Calgary for its executive and corporate members.

Over 100 private sector and Aboriginal

business leaders attended the breakfasts in Edmonton and Calgary October 25 and 26.

Participants at the workshop in Edmonton included representatives from PCL Construction Inc., Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Inc., Syncrude Canada and ATCO Electric. In addition, there were representatives from Sunchild First Nation, Samson Cree Nation, Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations, Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta and Loon River Cree First Nation, among others.

Participants at the workshop in Calgary included representatives of Canada Japan Oil Sands Ltd., TransAlta Utilities, AEC Oil & Gas and the City of Calgary. Also, there were representatives from the Blood First Nation, Siksika First Nation and Tsuu T'ina First Nation, among others.

The Regional Director General of the Alberta Region of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Barrie Robb, said there were already a number of success stories involving Aboriginal business in Alberta.

He pointed out how a number of First Nations business in Alberta, like the Timothy Hay processing plant at the Blood First Nation, are now trading

internationally. The Blood Tribe sells much of its hay to Japan.

He also mentioned the Petroleum Employment Training project in Wabasca in Northern Alberta, where 23 of 25 community trainees have successfully been placed in jobs in industry and the community.

In addition, Robb said an agreement signed in January 2000 saw the federal government providing \$750,000 over the next three years to support the Athabasca Tribal Council (which represents five First Nations) as a partner in the forecasted \$25 billion expansion of the Athabasca oil sands. This partnership also has the support of the corporate sector and the provincial government.

"First Nations in Alberta have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the Alberta economy over the past four years," said Robb. "The economic 'spin-offs' of those investments are extremely significant.

"If we can expand the value of that business by sharing information and developing partnerships with private sector business and industry, it's a 'win-win' for everybody," he said.

RENTAL EQUIPMENT *Continued from Page 2*

"We have a full line rental including construction and rentals for home owners, industry, commercial and oil field businesses. We've got everything," said Cloutier.

Since the First Nation bought 50 per cent of the business, sales have increased through various contacts with oil and gas companies as well as other industries in the surrounding area.

"Because of the partnership, we have been able to expand and double the size of the business," said Cloutier.

Previous to the partnership, Cloutier was renting a shared 2,500 square foot building. The new partnership with Woodland allowed for the construction of a new 4,000 square foot building in Peace River and the opening of an additional location in High Level.

For the First Nation, the new partnership is a financial investment but it has also opened a great opportunity for band members interested in pursuing a career in business.

"We increased our staff by five employees with two in High Level. We now have seven in total," said Cloutier.

"We've been able to employ different people from Woodland as well."

North Peace Rentals also runs a summer employment program to provide work experience specifically for band members.

"I'm sure we'll be talking about and planning for next summer's program soon," said Cloutier.

"I'm looking forward to it."

With a lucrative trading area, market potential and the successful combination of Dennis Cloutier and the Woodland Cree First Nation, future growth is certain for North Peace Rentals.

Mikisew Cree First Nation – Flying On Its Own

By Terry Lusty

Mikisew Cree First Nation, near Fort Chipewyan in Alberta's extreme northeast part of the province, owns a business that can fly circles around its competition, literally.

Air Mikisew Ltd., wholly owned by Mikisew Cree First Nation, has its corporate headquarters at Allison Bay Reserve but has bases at Fort McMurray, Edmonton, Fort Chipewyan and LaLoche, Saskatchewan.

Air Mikisew was formerly known as Contact Air, an airline started by prospector Milt McDougal. Contact Air started with only one plane, a Piper Super Cub, and eventually grew to a fleet of 13, thanks, in large part, to business from the oil sands.

Mikisew bought 50 per cent of the company in 1991 and took it over completely in 1995. By 1999, the company officially registered as Air Mikisew Ltd. It now boasts 65 staff with 22 full time pilots and 11 technical personnel. Six of the technical personnel are aircraft maintenance engineers and the rest are apprentices.

The airline presently operates 13 planes.

"It is an operation rife with pride," said Lynn Goyer, Operations Manager for Air Mikisew.

"We're very proud of the company's ability to change according to the needs of

its customers. If it's desired and viable, we'll do it."

Air Mikisew caters to tourism. For example, sports fishing at four remote lakes located between Fort Chipewyan and Fort Smith, NWT, are drawing fishermen trying to hook into the legendary 40-pound Northern Pike or Lake Trout.



PHOTO BY TERRY LUSTY

One of 13 airplanes owned and operated by Air Mikisew Ltd.

Air Mikisew is constantly on the lookout to expand its horizons.

"It has become the largest carrier service in northern Alberta," said Goyer.

"And our medi-vac plane is the largest outside of a Hercules."

Back in mid-January, Saskatoon Health demonstrated its confidence in the airline when it had Air Mikisew transfer a heart transplant patient to Edmonton.

"The airline has full-time nurses and paramedics, something that no other Alberta medi-vac can provide," said Goyer.

"It makes us unique."

A board of governors, chaired by Mikisew Cree Chief George Poitras, oversees Air Mikisew. The board has developed a long-term strategy aimed at expanding service to other markets, forming cooperative ties with larger carriers and expanding its fleet of aircraft.

Air Mikisew Ltd. has most recently spread its wings beyond Alberta with the purchase of LaLoche Airways in Saskatchewan, a small company with just two planes.

While the administration for Air Mikisew admit they are out to make money, Goyer states they are more interested in the betterment of the people in Mikisew.

Operating under Canadian aviation regulations, Air Mikisew flies passengers between Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan as well as the

Edmonton City Centre Airport twice a day, year round.

They also transport about 3,000 Syncrude and Suncor staff between Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan and Edmonton.

In the future, Mikisew looks to converting to an all-turbine fleet. They are proud of their success and the fact they did it all without one cent from outside interests – government or otherwise.

"There have been no handouts whatsoever and we are 100 per cent independent," said Goyer.

"We can stand up to any other carrier our size and fly circles around them."

Alberta Economic Development Projects Receive Ministerial Kick-Off

By Jim Starko

The Honourable Robert Nault, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, was in Edmonton on March 16, 2001 where he held a press conference to announce two major First Nations economic development projects, one in northern Alberta and the other in southern Alberta.

The \$6.5 million Mataki Farm Irrigation Project will see the Blood Tribe, located just southwest of Lethbridge, receive \$3 million in federal funding dedicated to economic infrastructure. The federal funds will be used to refurbish the Blood Tribe's irrigation system installed in the 1970s.

The Fort McKay/Shell Canada Business Agreement will see Fort McKay First Nation, located just north of Fort McMurray, receive \$1.75 million in federal funding. This money will enable the First Nation to participate in the \$5.1 billion Athabasca Oil Sands Project, of which Shell owns 60 per cent.

"There is strong public support for government investment to help First Nations become self-sufficient," said Minister Nault.

"Canadians want to see improvements in the lives of First Nations people and believe increased and sustained economic development is key to leading to greater First Nations' autonomy. It is also gratifying to see private industry like Shell Canada willing to partner in economic development projects with First

Nations. This is truly a win-win scenario not only for the parties involved, but for all Canadians."

Chief Chris Shade of Blood Tribe said: "On behalf of Blood Tribe Chief and Council and Kainai Agri Business Corporation, we extend much gratitude to Minister Robert Nault. This Mataki Farm irrigation project is very important to our agricultural-based industry on the Blood Reserve. By enhancing our economic development enterprises and with our vast land base, it will assist our Tribe to achieve self-sufficiency."



Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Robert Nault interviewed by Edmonton's CFRN-TV during a March 16 news conference announcing two major economic development projects in Alberta.

"This project is a great example of how government, industry and First Nations can work together to promote self-reliance among First Nation members and to expedite the path toward independence," said Chief Jim Boucher of the Fort McKay First Nation.

"This is the ideal situation for Shell Canada," said Neil Camarta, Senior Vice President, Oil Sands, Shell Canada. "We've gained a competent and competitive business partner while at the same time assisting in meaningful economic development for the community."

Building on the opportunities and experience gained through the business agreement, Fort McKay First Nation intends to maximize their participation in oil sands development through the provision of competent, qualified services. The agreement will also result in the creation of approximately 100 Aboriginal and 50 non-Aboriginal jobs over the next five years.

To achieve these goals, Fort McKay will purchase, operate and maintain approximately 150 pieces of equipment by the late 2002 opening of the Muskeg River Mine, the "upstream" component of the massive Athabasca Oil Sands Project (AOSP) development taking place in northern Alberta.

Fort McKay will also construct maintenance shops, bulk fuel storage facilities and a 56,000 square foot office complex. Fort McKay has a 10-year lease, plus options to renew, for eight acres of Alberta Crown land adjacent to the Muskeg River Mine.

This long-term business relationship will be further fostered through the involvement of Albion Sands Energy Inc., the company established by AOSP to operate the Mine.

The Mataki Farms Irrigation Project will result in a total of 3,200 acres of irrigated land on the Blood reserve. Expanded operations and new economic development opportunities following completion of the project will include the growing of seed potatoes and Timothy Hay that will be processed at the Blood hay densifying plant for export to Japan and other Canadian trading partners.

Both of these projects demonstrate the Government of Canada's commitment to promoting self-sufficient, economically strong Aboriginal and northern communities as outlined in the most recent Speech From The Throne.

Alberta Indian Investment Corporation: Investing in Alberta's First Nations

By Terry Lusty

One of the greatest hurdles for First Nation entrepreneurs has been their inability to access financial capital. The Alberta Indian Investment Corporation (AIIC) set out to change this.

AIIC began operations in 1988 on the Enoch Cree Nation near Edmonton as a subsidiary under the Indian Equity Foundation (IEF). IEF was established in the mid-1970s to provide help to First Nation business ventures. By the mid-1980s, its capital base was threatened and an alternative delivery system was needed to address the increasing demand for capital. As a result, AIIC was created.

All First Nation communities in Alberta own both the IEF and the AIIC. The organization is governed by an eight-member board led by President Fred Gladstone from Blood Tribe.

AIIC's General Manager, Don Morin, explains they were able to access \$8 million of their loan fund from the federal government. That, coupled with \$2 million of their own dollars, gave them

\$10 million in capital. Today, that amount has grown to almost \$13 million available to lend.

And Morin is proud of their track record.

"Including this year, we've done over \$30 million in loans or approximately \$2.5 million a year since inception," he said.

Of 32 Aboriginal capital corporations around the country, AIIC claims to be one of the largest with a high percentage of First Nation staff.

AIIC's statistics speak for themselves. For example, its service to more than 100 clients has created 430 jobs, 374 of which are full-time. Translated into wages, those jobs total more than \$9 million.

AIIC is also there to assist where banks cannot or will not and takes loan applications from those who would not normally qualify with banks. Morin makes it abundantly clear that they are there to compete with banks.

"Our clients often face problems such as little or no equity or they've damaged their credit ratings," Morin said.

"AIIC will work with them to either pay it out or figure out a debt repayment plan with the debtor."

To better assist clientele, AIIC staff provides guidance. They encourage their staff to personally visit the communities and



AIIC staff. Pictured in back row, left to right, is Eugene Whiskyjack, Don Morin, Rocky Sinclair, Bob Madill and Wayne Woods. In the front row, left to right, is April Stone, Nola Waruch, Deidre Standing Along, Mayrose Dos Santos.

schools regularly. They also conduct at least one workshop a month on what it takes to start and succeed in business. These workshops are usually located in First Nation communities in Alberta.

One particular message Morin likes to emphasize is that there are a lot of business opportunities out there, especially on reserves. AIIC wants to help the First Nation communities develop more projects that will help expand their economies.

One of their success stories is a stationery business owned by Audrey and Maureen Ward in Hobbema. The two started their company in 1995 with the assistance of AIIC. The company is still going strong and has since expanded off-reserve.

Another success story involved the late Archie Gladue from Chipewyan Prairie First Nation. He owned and operated a few businesses that catered to the oil patch, becoming one of the most successful ventures funded by AIIC.

Morin states that one important ingredient to a successful business is being realistic and being prepared to work hard.

"Acquiring a loan is sometimes the easiest part, making the business a success in most cases is usually the hardest part."



AIIC General Manager, Don Morin (seated), gets a little assistance from AIIC staff, Rocky Sinclair (right) and Nola Waruch (left).

Factums

What is the Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative (AWPI)?

A partnership initiative of the federal government to increase the participation of Aboriginal peoples in the labour market. The federal government is committed to help Aboriginal peoples build stronger, healthier and more self-reliant communities. AWPI's goal is to educate and inform employers about the advantages of hiring Aboriginal peoples.

Responsibility for the initiative is shared between Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Treasury Board Secretariat.

What sectors of the economy does AWPI seek partnership with?

- Aboriginal communities, businesses and organizations
- public and private corporations
- all levels of government
- industry and trade associations
- professional associations
- labour unions
- educational institutions

Why is AWPI important?

Aboriginal peoples make up one of the fastest-growing segments of the population in Canada, increasing at almost twice the national average.

They represent an increasingly educated, readily available workforce, eager to assume an active role in the country's economy.

Despite this, their participation in the labour force is lower and their unemployment rate higher than that of non-Aboriginal Canadians.

What kinds of activities does AWPI do?

- producing and distributing awareness-building materials and participating in awareness activities
- organizing and participating in conferences, seminars and workshops
- creating, promoting and participating in stakeholder networks
- communicating events related to Aboriginal employment issues
- identifying and promoting best practices and role models
- developing and distributing skill-building tools and resources for employers
- facilitating pilot projects

To obtain a copy of the employer toolkit or to book a presentation on AWPI, please contact:

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