

INAC remains committed to partnerships

Economic development for First Nations is a priority of the Government of Canada and, as such, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) remains committed to establishing partnerships with other levels of government such as the Province of Alberta, regional municipalities and private industry in Aboriginal economic development projects.

These partnerships are crucial to First Nations' self-sufficiency. You might ask, why? Let's look at some of the challenges facing First Nations and Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal labour force is by far the fastest growing in Canada - something like five times the national average. The Aboriginal unemployment rate in Alberta is nearly 18 per

cent versus a non-Aboriginal unemployment rate of less than five per cent. In order for these rates to be equal, one out of every eight new jobs created in Alberta must be filled by an Aboriginal person.

The average income of an Aboriginal Albertan is approximately \$17,000 per year as compared to more than \$26,000 for their non-Aboriginal counterparts and the social assistance dependency rate for Aboriginal Albertans is 46 per cent versus less than three per cent for non-Aboriginal peoples.

These are some of the reasons that INAC has increased economic development funding more than five

fold in the last three years from \$25 million to \$125 million. This increased funding has brought unparalleled support from the private sector, First Nations communities and other governments.

Last year, in Alberta alone, an investment of approximately \$9 million of INAC economic development funds in First Nation projects leveraged an additional \$27 million in Alberta's economy. This resulted in a total investment of nearly \$40 million and the creation of more than 3,000 direct and indirect jobs.

One of the areas in which Aboriginal entrepreneurs and businesses have become very actively involved is Alberta's burgeoning oil and gas sector. In the pages that follow, you will read about some of those key economic development partnerships through the eyes of the Aboriginal businesses themselves. We like to think the stories that follow are prime examples not only of Aboriginal, but Canadian, business success stories.



PHOTO BY: DICK BRAKELE

Four Lakes Drilling Corporation employee Meynard Metchewais on Rig 298 Super Single

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Keyano-Pimee focused on pumping up business

First Nation communities in northeastern Alberta are on the move.

As the concepts of self-sufficiency and self-government become even more desirable for First Nations, several communities in the northeast are pursuing economic ventures like never before, especially in the oil and gas industry.

While getting into the industry can be something of a gamble, it can also be profitable. For Saddle Lake First Nation, it was a gamble worth taking.

“One has to go back an entire generation, 25 or more years, to the mid-1970s, when then-Chief, the late Eugene Steinhauer, had a vision of prosperity for his reserve,” said Brian Cardinal, former business manager for the band’s Keyano-Pimee Exploration Company Ltd.

The oil industry displayed some serious interest in Saddle Lake lands and Steinhauer thought it would be good for the First Nation if companies could be encouraged to produce. The Nation agreed to Steinhauer’s position and, following some extensive drilling, the revenues began to flow in 1977.

By 1990, when Cardinal was brought on board as the oil and gas manager, revenues were declining. By 1994-95, things were in a lull. That’s when Saddle Lake, with Whitefish (Goodfish) Lake as a partner, renewed discussions with oil companies in Calgary. The First Nations had the land and resources; the oil companies had the expertise. Eventually, they signed a joint venture agreement with Auburn



Keyano-Pimee oil drilling rig

Energy Ltd. in 1998, created Keyano-Pimee, and never looked back.

From there, things mushroomed and Auburn Energy was acquired by Tusk Oil, a larger company aggressive in drilling and exploration. In 1999, Cardinal went from oil and gas manager to business manager for the company.

In 2001, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada contributed \$300,000 in federal

funding to assist Saddle Lake and Whitefish Lake in producing natural gas on their reserves. An equal amount was put up by the bands and 10 projected wells became their goal.

“By 2002, when I left the company, Auburn shared 21 wells with us,” said Cardinal.

“As well, between 50 and 70 people were directly employed, not to mention the many business spin-offs that were created.”

Now, based on its 10-well drilling program, Keyano-Pimee believes it can pull in over \$7 million a year in revenues over the next five-year period.

“The exploration company did a super job,” said Cardinal.

“While most are comfortable with a 70 per cent success rate, we had 95 per cent.”

Cardinal is proud of their track record and the fact that bands are demonstrating their ability to jump into the picture and be successful.

“Of course, First Nations are recognizing that partnerships with combined financial and management resources are the key to success,” said Cardinal.



Keyano Compressor Station

The financial success of Keyano-Pimee has not only created a sense of pride among members but has also led to more and better housing.

Saddle Lake

drills its way into the oil and gas business

In January 2003, Saddle Lake First Nation took a historic first step in the oil and gas drilling business through the acquisition of a 50 per cent interest in an oil and gas drilling rig. The joint venture with EnCana Corporation and Western Lakota Energy Services Inc. is a multi-million dollar project that will bring jobs, training and expanded business expertise to Saddle Lake.

The venture includes a 50/50 partnership with Western Lakota and a contract from EnCana Corporation to use the rig for drilling in northern Alberta and northeast British Columbia. Most impressive is the rig's drilling capacity, which can go to a depth of up to 3,700 metres. The rig also has a life span of at least 25-30 years.

The union of the three partners signals a growing trend by First Nations interest groups. First Nation ventures in the oil industry are being hailed by many and a number of the bands are projecting that spin-offs can help to resolve some of the economic woes that may afflict First Nation communities.

In May 2003, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada kicked in \$787,500 to assist Saddle Lake in the acquisition of the rig.

For the sake of present and future generations of the Saddle Lake First Nation, Chief Eddy Makokis said it is necessary for First Nation people to develop economies



Signing ceremony with EnCana Corporation, Saddle Lake First Nation and Western Lakota Energy Services

by partnering and participating in opportunities like this.

"This project is very important to our community and members," said Chief Makokis.

"We are determined to work with industry and government to maximize economic benefits from resource development, while ensuring the protection of our Treaty rights and the enhancement of our traditional ways."

Andy Popko, Vice-President of Aboriginal Affairs for EnCana Corporation, expressed a great deal of optimism on the rig's future. In fact, EnCana was so confident about its possibilities for future success that it supported the First Nation in its efforts to obtain private financing.

"The purchase of this rig is a clear illustration of our concept of capacity building with communities where we have an operating interest," said Popko.

"Not only is it a business opportunity on its own, but the purchase also signals the Saddle Lake First Nation's intent to develop on-reserve skills that can be applied

throughout the oil patch. EnCana fully recognizes the potential that Aboriginal communities have in developing the labour so desperately needed by our growing industry."

Discussions with Saddle Lake originated about a year ago, after Elson McDougald, President of Western Lakota Energy Services Inc., was invited to make a presentation to the Saddle Lake Chief and Council. According to McDougald, although the First Nation had a very positive attitude

towards economic development, there was a learning process to go through.

"We had to convince them of the economic merits and financial sustainability of the energy service business," said McDougald.

McDougald, whose oilfield experience goes back to 1963, said he would like to pass on his knowledge to Aboriginal people.

"Training is there for those wanting to enter the oil industry," said McDougald.

"We start with on-the-job training, then line them up with courses on safety and first-aid and, finally, provide training for them to move up the ladder to motor man, derrick man, driller and so on."

Ten new jobs were created by this project, as well as a potential 77 indirect jobs in the oil and gas sector. In addition, Saddle Lake members will be provided with training that will ensure transferable job skills in the drilling industry beyond this present partnership.

EnCana Corporation

helps build Aboriginal drilling company

In a remote corner of the northeast Alberta muskeg, a shiny new drilling rig is tapping the social and economic riches of the province's Aboriginal and geological resources.

A crew that includes rookie Aboriginal rig hands — members of four northeast Alberta First Nations — is operating Precision Drilling Corporation Rig 298 Super Single, exploring for EnCana Corporation (formerly Alberta Energy Company, or AEC).

In December 2001, the rig's first well marked the working start of a 50/50 partnership between the Precision Drilling Corporation and the Four Lakes Drilling Corporation. Commonly referred to as East Central Alberta Treaty 6, or ECAT6, the partnership is a joint venture of the Kehewin, Frog Lake, Cold Lake and Heart Lake First Nations.

The Four Lakes/Precision Drilling partnership is a historic venture, enabling Canada's First Nation communities to own and operate an oil-well drilling company and provide employment and training opportunities for their people. Conceived in September 2000 by AEC, the project was announced in April 2001 by the participants. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada contributed \$1.1 million towards the project.

Drilling more than 1,000 wells per year, AEC backed the business idea by promising a solid foundation of work and guaranteeing the rig 1,000 days of drilling at competitive rates, over the next four years. Precision, Canada's largest drilling company, took part ownership and lead the construction and operation of the rig. The four First Nations supplied investment and the people to run the operation.

"This has been a great success. It's emblematic of what we call capacity building," said Andy Popko, EnCana's Vice-President of Aboriginal Affairs.



First Nation drummers at a signing ceremony in Cold Lake First Nations

"Through our daily business investments, we look for ways that residents of communities where we operate can participate in sustainable businesses that help their people. In this instance, the four First Nations are the proud new owners and operators of a top-notch drilling rig and its employees face a bright future in Canada's dynamic energy industry."

"To get this opportunity is a good feeling, working on a Native rig. We can develop a

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Learning to get along in Wood Buffalo

Up north, the mammoth draglines and bucket wheels, once solely symbolic of oil sands operations, have been making way for more energy-efficient truck-and-shovel and hydro transport technologies.

Along with the new equipment comes big plans — more than \$80 billion to finance expansion and significant increases in oil production. This is good news for Canadians interested in energy security and economic opportunity. But what about the several First Nation communities situated next door to this huge and complex beehive of industrial activity? Do they stand to benefit as well? Or will they watch in uncomprehending awe from the sidelines as the show goes by?

"It's fair to say that no one is more naturally affected by oil sands industry development

than First Nations," said Chief Jim Boucher, President and Chairperson of the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC), which represents five First Nations in the Wood Buffalo region (Fort McKay, Fort McMurray, Athabasca Chipewyan, Chipewyan Prairie and Mikisew Cree).

"The deposits and much of the mining activity occur in areas that are directly within our sphere of living."

Boucher, who is also Chief of the Fort McKay First Nation, points out that productive one-on-one relationships have been developed over the years with long-time producers Suncor and Syncrude, addressing mutual concerns. But when the floodgate opened in the mid-1990s and the multi-billion dollar investments began to pour in, First Nation communities began to wonder about cumulative effects and about whether or not they were adequately equipped to fully participate in and influence development.

"In effect, we wanted to regionalize our relationship with the developers," said Boucher.

"We hoped to maintain individual relationships, while striking a bargain that would bring everyone involved to the table to share information and to learn, plan and work together."

The result, stemming from a strategic plan developed by the ATC, was the capacity building agreement signed for a three-year term beginning in 1999.

Co-funded by industry and the provincial and federal governments, the agreement addressed issues related to environmental impacts, employment and training, community development and infrastructure. In essence, the agreement aimed to better impart knowledge so that the First Nations might

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Mikisew Slings & Safety Ltd.:

quality products, guaranteed service

Location. Location. Location.
As the real estate saying goes,
the secret to success in business
is location.



Mikisew Slings & Safety Ltd. worker

When Mikisew Cree First Nation first considered getting into the manufacturing industry, they planned to locate on their reserve in Fort Chipewyan, about 700 kilometres north of Edmonton. When time and distance proved to be insurmountable problems, they chose Edmonton.

It proved to be the right move as Mikisew Slings & Safety Ltd., a fledgling member of the Mikisew Cree Group of Companies, celebrated its first anniversary in September 2003 as the largest supplier of standard and custom industrial slings in Western Canada. Inside a 17,000 square-foot facility, production sewers convert webbing into round and web-style slings which are sold throughout their distribution area. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada was pleased to contribute to its success through \$300,000 in economic development funding.

The company, wholly owned by the Mikisew Cree First Nation and its membership, has a commitment to providing quality products and guaranteed service at reasonable prices. This is already being achieved in its initial year due, in large part, to its experienced leadership and well-trained employees.

Company president Allan Taschuk has 15 years experience and Mikisew Slings & Safety is the third company he has had a hand in starting.

“It’s a highly competitive business with about 15 to 20 others in the field,” said Taschuk.

“But we had a ready market in the northeast Alberta region.”

The company’s products are sold through their distributor, Acklands-Grainger, to Suncor, Syncrude Canada Ltd., Albian Sands and Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Ltd., to name a few.

It has been a very busy first year and the company is already looking to add to their product line and increase their market share. To this end, the company appointed its first sales person this fall.

“Promotion and exposure are important,” said Taschuk.

“We have our name and logo on everything. Perhaps that’s where some companies go wrong — they do good work but don’t promote themselves enough.”

A key factor in the decision to locate their business in Edmonton was to provide employment for Mikisew Cree First Nation’s urban members. Of the current 14 employees, 70 per cent are First Nation members who have been trained by Taschuk and are working in all areas of the business. With education and industry-

specific training, the company believes assisting employees achieve their goals will also ensure the company reaches its goals.

An example of industry-specific training is sewing the webbing to make slings. Production sewers have built on their home sewing experience to operate industrial sewing machines, thereby creating designs that ensure the strength of the synthetic webbing. The company produces about 5,000 slings a month.

The facility also houses a Proof Load Test Bed to test its used slings, cables and chains. Mikisew Slings has a 5:1 safety ratio standard for their products, which are tested to the point of destruction. For example, if a sling breaks at 10,000 lbs., it is rated for use safely at 2,000 lbs.

The safety considerations of the business resulted in an early partnership with Norguard Industries. Through an alliance with this major manufacturer, Mikisew Slings & Safety is also able to re-sell fall protection and height-related products, such as safety harnesses.



Mikisew Slings & Safety Ltd. worker

From its location in south Edmonton, Mikisew Slings & Safety builds on its success, continuing to offer its customers the best in customer service, manufacturing and testing of products while, at the same time, developing a highly trained and skilled workforce.

LRC Contractors Ltd.: formula for success

Since its inception in 1992, Loon River Cree (LRC) Contractors Ltd. has worked hard to achieve success in all that it does. From its start as a small labour contractor, it has grown to where it now has annual sales of over \$2 million.

The company, owned by the Loon River First Nation, was established to take advantage of business and employment opportunities arising from oil exploration, construction and production on their reserve lands and surrounding area. Loon River, near Red Earth Creek, is about two hours from Slave Lake.

"There was a lot of good labour and sawmen in the area," said Brian Pitcairn, company manager for the past seven years.

"We got contracts in seismic clearing and other cutting and hand falling work and we paid the workers ourselves."

LRC was also involved in many of the First Nation's construction projects on the reserve, including road grading.

Six years ago, LRC decided owning heavy equipment was necessary if it were to stay in business. Company profits and their own credit



LRC Contractors Ltd. heavy equipment

line enabled them to purchase five caterpillar tractors, three track hoes and two graders over the next few years. The company is proud to say the debt is now about 60 per cent retired. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada also contributed \$90,000 in 2002/2003 to help them purchase equipment.

The company also subcontracts out equipment. Right now, two tanker trucks are subcontracted for crude oil transportation.

It has not been easy for the company's owners. Their initial bid to get into business didn't go over very well with competitors in the area. It took considerable negotiation with head offices of energy companies to allow them to get their foot in the door. The ongoing relationships have enabled LRC to conduct business without any formal contracts.

Another issue the company had to deal with was the difficulty in attracting workers to the area when local labour was not available, especially since their work is seasonal.

The bottom line is not the only measure of the accomplishments of LRC Contractors. When they got into the heavy equipment business, there were not too many Loon River First Nation members who were qualified operators.

Through experience and on-the-job training, qualified operators are now the majority.

Does LRC Contractors Ltd. consider itself successful?

"Yes," emphatically states Pitcairn.

"We're beginning to establish a good track record with banks and energy companies. We've managed to overcome opposition from other contractors in the area and we've changed the views of field staff employed by energy companies. We are operating a profitable company and we're employing more Loon River First Nation members as well as others."

While the company has no immediate expansion plans, they are aware of heavy oil exploration coming into their area and the possibility of diamond exploration seismic work in the future.

LRC Contractors Ltd. will undoubtedly continue using its formula for success in these and other ventures.

WOOD BUFFALO *Continued from Page 4*

further develop the capacity to procure oil sands jobs and business opportunities and to succeed in them on a competitive basis, while preserving the social and environmental integrity of the communities.

"Indeed, it's been a great deal for everybody involved," said Eric Newell, Chairman and CEO of Syncrude Canada Ltd., one of the Athabasca regional developers who are party to the agreement.

"It affords a greater deal of clarity in all things. We know better where we stand and what we've got to do to address any concerns and, in the Aboriginal community, we've got access to one of the best workforces anywhere."

Perhaps the best sign of the overall success of the agreement is its recent renewal for a second term. Governments, including \$1.2 million from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, have again pitched in and other players like Shell Canada have come on board. As intended, First Nation communities continue to strengthen their roles in oil sands development.

Chief Boucher points out that annual Aboriginal procurement contracts with oil sands partners have increased from \$60 million to \$250 million over the three years. As well, over 1,000 Aboriginal people are now employed in the industry at an average annual salary of \$70,000.

While the development of capacity is synonymous with the eventual achievement of a brand of self-reliance that does not necessarily require the guidance of set programs or policies, the large scale and dizzying pace of oil sands development does, for now, suggest a need for a degree of assured formality and recourse, if needed. In any event, mammoth projects or not, northern Alberta's capacity building agreement sets a high standard for others as an excellent and innovative model of cooperation among parties.

Fort McKay First Nation takes charge of its future

Like a great hurricane gathering force, more than \$80 billion of new oil sands development now underway in northern Alberta is bound to carry a punch powerful enough to affect everyone and everything in its path. And the people of Fort McKay are no exception.

Located right in the middle of the Athabasca Oil Sands Deposit, one of the largest oil reserves on earth, the First Nation stood to either parlay its position into a slice of a very significant economic pie or be engulfed. With a great degree of foresight, Fort McKay began preparing for the oil sands storm back in 1986 when Suncor and Syncrude were the only games in town and, even then, mere shadows of their current giant selves.

"I think that people in the rest of Alberta and Canada really started paying attention to the oil sands in the mid-1990's when this current round of expansion began," said Fort McKay Chief Jim Boucher.

"But for us, even before that, we only had to look as far as our own back yards to see that our economy and way of life was going to be affected by all this activity and that we'd better be prepared to deal with it effectively."

Over the years, the community has participated in a variety of initiatives designed to help ensure it earns a fair share of opportunity while preserving its unique ways of life, heritage and culture.



Fort McKay Industrial Park sod turning ceremony with Chief Boucher

Recently, the community spearheaded the establishment of the prototype Fort McKay Industrial Park.

The park, a \$3.4 million project that received \$1.5 million in funding from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, is the first industrial subdivision zoned north of Fort McMurray, a little more than a half hour's drive away. On 28 hectares of land, the park offers serviced industrial lots to companies looking for the advantages of close-up contact with oil sands operators. Fort McKay and other First Nations in the surrounding area will operate businesses located in the park, providing them with the opportunity to establish long-term relationships with private industry through contracting goods and services to the oil sands on a one-on-one basis or in joint ventures.

The First Nation has also inked a deal with Shell Canada to help assure participation in the new multi-billion dollar Athabasca Oil Sands Project. The deal with Shell, 60 per cent owner of the project, includes the nearby Muskeg River Mine. Valued at about \$27 million — including federal funding of \$1.75 million — the project will maximize Fort McKay's participation in a large-scale industrial operation that will provide 10 per cent of Canada's oil needs.

The bulk of Fort McKay's funds were devoted to the purchase and operation of heavy equipment and the construction of maintenance shops and other facilities on Crown land adjacent to the mine site. The agreement also provides for a minimum of 75 per cent of the employment and business opportunities for Fort McKay First Nation members for the duration of the project. About 100 jobs for Aboriginal people will be created over the next five years.

"These projects are among the latest in our ongoing efforts to generate meaningful business and employment opportunities for the people of our community," said Chief Boucher.

"I'm very pleased with the success we've had and optimistic that we will continue to earn our way, to add value and to stay true to ourselves."

And with more of the right mixture of leadership and partnership applied to the warm and cold fronts of opportunity and challenge, a perfect storm of prosperity seems to be brewing just over the horizon.

ENCANA CORP.

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good business sense running this rig and not just one, maybe four or five [rigs] to make this company grow," said floor-hand Meynard Metchewais of the Cold Lake First Nations.

It was a proud day for everyone when several tractor trailers rolled onto the Cold Lake First Nations reserve carrying the new rig.

"My mother (Cold Lake First Nations Chief

Joyce Metchewais) said she couldn't believe it, seeing the trucks bring this machine onto our reserve. It makes you feel good to help build a stable reserve," said Metchewais.

The Four Lakes rig venture is one of many Aboriginal capacity-building initiatives that EnCana has participated in over the past several years. EnCana partners with many Aboriginal-owned businesses that are hired to supply countless services to the company's

field operations. Contracts are issued based on good, sound cost-competitiveness and a solid reputation for performance. And the partnerships succeed because the suppliers and contractors perform well, control costs and honour contracts.

"By committing to keep these rigs running for a number of years, the new companies are able to generate sustainable revenues for the communities involved. It's the kind of success that we seek to repeat elsewhere," said Popko.

Cleaning up in Fort Chip

In the often unsung business of industrial waste management, the general population might tend to measure the value of the service by the inconveniences or even more severe consequences of no service at all.



Denesoline Waste Management truck

On the surface, it may not seem the most glamorous of vocations. But dig a little deeper in Fort Chipewyan, one of Alberta's oldest and most northern settlements, and Denesoline Environment Ltd. emerges in shining contrast to the stereotype. Wholly-owned by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, it is an inspiring example of the unfettered application of ingenuity over narrow-mindedness and action-inspiring vision over bureaucratic daydreaming.

In short, Denesoline has made an energetic, respectable and profitable art of handling the cast-off debris of Canada's oil sands industry.

"For centuries, we've lived in a demanding and unforgiving northern environment," said Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Archie Cyprien.

"But it's also an environment that encourages and rewards the hard work and the acquisition of knowledge, whether it means catching fish, building shelter against the elements, or establishing a successful enterprise like Denesoline."

Denesoline was set up in 1994 to handle Syncrude Canada Ltd.'s waste management operations. A major player in Canada's burgeoning oil sands industry, Syncrude is not the kind of company that just gives opportunities like this away. Excellence is expected in all things. And, even with particularly progressive Aboriginal development policies in place, its business must be earned in a very competitive environment.

For almost 10 years, Denesoline has built a reputation for quality service. The initial five-year contract with Syncrude is still going strong. Suncor Inc., Petro Canada and Albion Sands Energy Inc., the newest oil sands industry entrant, have all been added to the client roster. Janitorial and related services have now been added to the list of corporate offerings.

The latest project, a \$2.8 million expansion, partially supported by a \$400,000 contribution from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, includes the purchase of new equipment and facilities, much of it for Albion. The work will generate more than \$1 million a year in wages for Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation members. It will provide employment and training opportunities in heavy equipment operation and other trades. And the investment also helps increase the Denesoline workforce from seven people in 1995 to 194 this year.

That is impressive for a community that boasts 600 - 700 members, many who live off-reserve. And it is also a particularly significant number measured against the backdrop of an isolated, but close-knit community. Fort Chipewyan, about 300 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, is only accessible by air in the summer.

"Up here, getting ahead doesn't mean beating out the guy in the next cubicle," said Chief Cyprien.

"Up here, success in business means creating viable alternatives, especially for our young people, to stop them from moving away in search of opportunities somewhere else. It means creating those opportunities ourselves right here at home."

A very noble pursuit and not such an unsung business after all.

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Published under the authority of the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development

Ottawa, 2004
www.inac.gc.ca
1-800-567-9604
TTY only 1-866-553-0554

QS-A023-030-BB-A1
ISSN 1493-857X

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