

Natural resource development targeted by Aboriginal business

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The future of natural resource development will be the hot topic during the fourth annual Resource Expo at the Hyatt Regency in Vancouver. From Nov. 7 to 10, Aboriginal, business and government leaders will come together to discuss the future of mining, energy and forestry on Aboriginal lands.

Hosted by the Native Investment and Trade Association (NITA), the event provides an opportunity to explore potential business opportunities in each of the three sectors.

"There's so much more Aboriginal involvement in the natural resources sectors. Almost all of them have major developments taking place out in areas where the Aboriginal people either own or control the land or at least have some say over what's going on as a result of the requirement to consult and accommodate Aboriginal interests," said Calvin Helin, president of NITA.

Event participants also can take in performances by Aboriginal artists at the popular NEXUS trade show, and enjoy a golf tournament and gala dinner.

Lorraine Rekmans, executive director of the National Aboriginal Forestry Association (NAFA) will provide the forestry perspective during the



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panel discussion.

Rekmans said NAFA is now developing strategies to encourage more people from the growing Aboriginal youth population to consider careers in the forest sector.

"This is the way that First Nations can have their issues addressed in forest management planning.

"This is an opportunity to generate revenues to sustain community development ... to provide employment and change the nature of approaches to forest management based on other values.

"Bringing Aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge into forest management, I think it's something that the...global forest community is looking at seriously ... and how do we incorporate that

knowledge into current practice," said Rekmans.

Because 80 per cent of First Nations reserves are situated in the forests, Rekmans said the emerging opportunities to branch out beyond timber forest products fits well with community development.

"We've never traditionally managed forests to yield other things like mushrooms, maple syrup or berries, and I don't mean 'we' as Aboriginal people.

"I mean 'we' as Canadians. So this is something that's completely new and exciting. We're seeing Aboriginal communities getting engaged in discussions about non-forest timber product opportunities and there's some interesting niches.

"I mean, to have non-timber forest products produced solely by Aboriginal communities that may be certified organic, these are very, very good opportunities for export in the world marketplace," said Rekmans.

The need for more workers is particularly true for the mining industry, said Helin.

With the success of diamond mining operations in northern Canada, where Aboriginal businesses such as the Yellowknife-based Deton'Cho Corporation have established a successful diamond polishing plant, Helin said there will be a higher demand for Aboriginal labour.

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Local co-operation urged

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Calvin Helin said, "What's happening in Canada is that by the year 2006, they expect that we will have a shortage between three to five million skilled workers because of the aging demographics and the population.

"By that time we should have about a million employable Aboriginal people and the question is how to turn those people which are largely a ... drain on social resources right now into a positive economic force ... In some of these areas where the developments are taking place, the Aboriginal population is the only population," Calvin Helin said.

"So it's more economical for a mining company to have a good relationship with the local population and work with a group of people that they can

come to rely on rather than have to be in a situation where they have to import workers from southern Canada and all the expenses that might entail," he added.

Rob Woods is the vice president of finance and operations at KODA Business Services based in Saskatoon.

For the past year and a half, KODA has been working on a biogas project that extracts methane from hog manure to produce natural gas and electricity.

Using KODA's experience as an example, Woods is hoping to raise awareness at the conference about using alternative energy to maximize green business opportunities while not depleting communities' natural resources.

"When we got into it, we looked into all the develop-

ments that were going on in our province ... green power and alternative energy, that kind of thing, is becoming a trend and is being pushed, not only by the Kyoto Accord," said Woods.

Although KODA has used an intensive livestock operation to harness green energy, Woods said alternative energy could also be drawn from other sources.

"You can always use your own sewage, your municipal solid waste system, your garbage for that matter, to begin to produce energy and power ... it gives you revenue that you probably never had before ... there's a good return on investment and investing in this type of project," said Woods.

For more information on the Resource Expo, visit this NITA Web site: www.native-invest-trade.com.