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Partners sought by First Nations

By Paul Luke
Business Reporter

B.C. companies risk being shoved aside by competitors from other provinces and countries eager to form partnerships with First Nations, aboriginal business leader Calvin Helin says.

Businesses in this province are falling behind their counterparts in other regions of Canada in pursuing joint ventures with First Nations, Helin said yesterday in Vancouver.

Aboriginal communities across the province are eager to find partners to develop natural resources in their territories — providing they are treated fairly as a stakeholder, Helin said at Resource Expo '04 conference.

"It's a new reality. I don't think a lot of the corporations here have gotten their minds around the shift that's taking place," Helin said.

"Whereas if you go to places like Alberta, the major oil and gas companies have been dealing with aboriginal people for 30 years. They are very experienced and very knowledgeable about how to deal with aboriginal interests."

Helin, a lawyer and member of B.C.'s Lax Kw'alaams band, is president of the B.C.-based Native Investment Trade Association. Helin also is one of the movers behind the Resource Expo designed to let aboriginal people and the resource-development sector air issues and make deals.

Besides the obvious potential B.C.'s aboriginal territories hold for forestry, mining, fisheries and oil and gas, First Nations represent an untapped wealth in human resources, Helin said.

As aging baby boomers leave the workforce, the fast-growing and relatively young native population could be harnessed to take their place, he said.

"When aboriginal people have a stake in a business you're not going to get instability and uncertainty — you're going to get reliable partners."

Garry Oker, chief of Doig River First Nation near Fort St. John, warned that aboriginal communities are wary of being given token positions in joint ventures.

The key is to ensure resources in lands to which aboriginal people are spiritually attached are developed in a sustainable manner, Oker said.