

Resources worth hundreds of millions for natives

OPPORTUNITIES | Aboriginal groups can benefit from oil, gas exploration, conference told

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B.C.'s aboriginal communities stand to make hundreds of millions of dollars from resource extraction deals over the next decade, according to the head of a native investment association.

"In Alberta, for example, aboriginal groups have received over \$400 million in revenues in the last year," Calvin Helin, president and CEO of the Native Investment & Trade Association (NITA), said in an interview Monday. "Their target is half a billion dollars. I think there will

be lots of posturing [in B.C.] because of treaties, but aboriginal people need to start generating revenues. It's been done very successfully in other places."

Helin made the comments during Resource Expo '04, a conference on aboriginal energy and resource development issues hosted by NITA in Vancouver.

He said aboriginal communities will be big players over the next 10 years in the fields of energy development — including offshore oil and gas exploration, minerals and mining, forestry and the 2010 Olympics. "You'll see the crystallization of a lot of

major deals, and aboriginal people won't be token participants."

Regarding offshore oil and gas exploration, he said aboriginal input is essential because it is controversial. "I think it will be developed and developed safely. And I think there will be fair and equitable partnerships."

Helin called the Olympics a huge opportunity for native groups, especially in construction, telecommunications and tourism. "The Squamish and Mount Currie bands have already made a lot of deals. What makes B.C. different is the huge wealth of aboriginal culture."

Chief Garry Oker of the Doig River First Nation in northeastern B.C. told about 100 delegates that aboriginal communities will require much more substantive

business deals in B.C. than what they've been offered so far.

He said that in the field of oil and gas exploration, "there's a lot of money being thrown around, but the truth of the matter is it's not sustainable. As soon as production stops, where are we? And that's the problem. Certainly money is important, but it's not the key to our survival."

Oker said their traditional land is a target for resource exploitation and his band wants to move from its traditional history as "hunters and gatherers." "But these guys [industry] are pros. They can get anything they want. And that puts us at a disadvantage. We want meaningful consultation, which doesn't mean just a token thing. We want to be full partners, not just 'we have to

consult the natives'."

Oker said environmental considerations are important for first nations communities. "It's not only about money. We want a lot of say in wildlife management."

Earlier Monday, B.C. energy and mines minister Richard Neufeld said there are huge opportunities for first nations communities in the resource field. Citing coal bed methane and offshore oil and gas exploration, Neufeld said the government plans to make first nations full partners.

He said first nations in Fort Nelson, for example, are already taking a lead in construction activity supporting industry.

Akita Drilling Ltd. vice-president Rob Hunt, whose company has already entered into a deal

with the Kaska First Nation in northeastern B.C., said Akita, based in Calgary, wants to expand its partnerships with first nations in B.C.

"I think the whole process will evolve whereby the companies will better understand the value of consulting with first nations. And as first nations better understand the business, you'll end up finding a balance in cultures that move at very different speeds. I think you'll see more cooperation in the future, but it's most important to get first nations involved in the process at a very early stage."

Hunt believes the greatest opportunities for first nations is "in catering, construction, water trucks, all the services that support the oil and gas operations."