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## Resource expo eyes northern wealth

### Aboriginal and business leaders meet to discuss development

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Aboriginal leaders, resource- industry companies and politicians are gathering this week in Vancouver for a conference that could unlock even more of British Columbia's northern wealth.

Resource Expo 2005 is organized by the Native Investment and Trade Association, focusing this year on natural gas and oil industry development, mining and forestry.

Three Canadian premiers, 2010 Winter Olympics CEO John Furlong and Alaska Gov. Frank Murkowski are on the speakers' roster.

Conference organizer Calvin Helin said Canadian federal and provincial governments are spending a total of \$18 billion per year in transfer payments to first nations and Inuit peoples -- costs that could be reduced or avoided if those groups were brought closer to the economic mainstream.

For B.C., that means incorporating aboriginal interests into the development of natural resources in light of Supreme Court of Canada decisions recognizing the duty of Canadian governments to consult on questions of land use.

B.C. teems with opportunities for oil-and-gas development as well as potential for new mines that could provide high-paying employment for local first nations -- with the provincial government gaining the opportunity to increase resource royalty revenue.

However, those projects often need first nations support to proceed.

Resource Expo attracts many of the aboriginal leaders who represent a key to unlocking those resources -- and their attendance is an indication of their willingness to listen, Helin said.

"I think this is one of the best times in the history of aboriginal people that we have a chance to actually move forward," Helin said in a recent interview.

"The tribes have real leverage. They are figuring out how to utilize that leverage in a way that makes a difference to the grassroots people. People should be aware of it, not only aboriginal people but non-aboriginal business people should be aware that these opportunities are there.

"We have to turn what's a social and economic drain into a huge economic and social positive. We've never been in a better situation to do this."

Helin describes the conference as a neutral forum.

"It's hard to get a lot of these people from remote places together and if you want to do business with them you have to go out and meet with them -- and if you're going to Nunavut it's a \$3,000-\$4,000 ticket."

Tony Fogarassy, an energy-

sector lawyer who works with clients on first nations issues, will update conference delegates on recent legal and political developments, notably B.C.'s "New Relationship" policy.

"If a project can be done right, with environmental sensitivity, then first nations would love to be a part of it," Fogarassy said.

"The downside of all of this is that it takes time. Most companies look at their quarterly financials or year-ends and expect certain deliverables, or shareholders expect certain deliverables to be met. When they deal with first nations communities the timelines are different."

Michael McPhie, president of the Mining Association of B.C., says "the greatest majority" of resource-development projects in B.C. will have a "substantive first nations component."

"This conference is a really good example of bringing all these groups together. It shows how top-of-mind it is to most of us."

The mining industry took a hit earlier this week when the B.C. Assembly of First Nations announced unanimous support for first nations who oppose Northgate Minerals' plan to use Duncan Lake to store gold mine waste for a \$200-million expansion of their Kemess gold mine.

McPhie says one of the benefits of Resource Expo is that it can serve as a forum for resource developers to highlight well-executed projects.

"There are going to be challenges. When you interlace that with an uncertain treaty environment, with Supreme Court decisions in different forums on different issues, I think what it speaks to is the need for forums like this to show projects that have been done well.

"Are there going to be conflicts? Of course. That's human nature. But I think [what] we need to do as an association is first to recognize the very legitimate role that indigenous people play in our decision-making and find ways to work together. That's got to be critical."

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