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## First Nations keen to tap resource riches

### Leaders seek self-reliance for future prosperity

By Karen Dyer - Business Edge

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COMMENT

British Columbia's Native leaders are eager to join the current boom in the natural resources sector, says the head of a Vancouver-based Aboriginal business and trade association.

"If you look at any western economy, generally 80 to 90 per cent of the wealth is created in the private sector," says Calvin Helin, CEO of the Native Investment and Trade Association (NITA).

"However, if you look at the welfare-trap model that's been force-fed into Native communities, typically all the wealth comes from transfer payments from the federal government. Since there haven't been historically many private businesses in Native communities, the money goes right back out, so it's just a recipe for more of the same - there will never be self-reliance."

The association is a non-profit group with a mandate to foster a healthier relationship between Aboriginal Canadians and the business community, and to pursue self-reliance through entrepreneurship.



File photo by Bayne Stanley, Business Edge

NITA boss Calvin Helin is pitching a healthier relationship between the First Nations and the business community.

As one of the founders of NITA in 1989, Helin points to opportunities for involvement in the present rapid development in a wide range of resource economies. He says he would like to see Aboriginal involvement in every natural resource development project in the province.

"Our motto is that we encourage self-reliance for Aboriginal people, because the only way to control our destiny is to control our own

purse-strings - to generate our own revenue. And that can only be done by getting into business."

One tangible result of this goal-setting is the Resource Expo '05 conference, taking place at the Sheraton Wall Centre on Oct. 31 to Nov. 1.

Co-hosted by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the third annual conference is billed as an opportunity for Canada's top business leaders to discuss new developments and opportunities in Aboriginal business.

Running concurrently with the conference is the Nexus Trade Show, the largest gathering of Aboriginal businesses in Canada. While the conference requires registration, the trade show is free to the public.

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As the energy sector in the western provinces and the North continues to sizzle, the expo aims to bring Aboriginal leaders and the business community together to take advantage of projects including oilsands investment, pipeline projects in the Mackenzie Valley and infrastructure projects in the Lower Mainland.

Discussions are planned on topics ranging from strategic economic development to wealth creation, as well as an examination of both conventional and alternative energies. Speakers will address major energy projects, including the oilsands and Mackenzie Valley and Alaska Highway pipelines.

Featured speakers come from public and private sectors and include northern premiers Paul Okalik (Nunavut) and Joe Handley (Northwest Territories) and CAPP president Pierre Alvarez.

With the First Nations people being the fastest-growing segment of Canada's population, the conference will also address meeting labour needs with Aboriginal employment.

As organizer of the expo, NITA's position is that a proposed investment of \$87 billion slated for oilsands development, along with much public and private investment being directed toward energy and mineral exploration, spells opportunity for the Native community.

Helin says another objective of the expo is to showcase successful interactions between the business and Native communities.

"Last year, native businesses in the Fort McMurray area generated \$400 million in revenue. And this year they are hoping to generate half a billion (dollars)," he says.

"If that money was going into the community as welfare, it would be a disaster. Instead, that money is being earned by families who are using that income to live organized, productive and happy lives."

First Nations are a pivotal part of the development of the province's resource base, says Helin.

"Aboriginal people have a very important role to play, not only from an historical point of view, but from a legal one," he says.

The Supreme Court of Canada has found that the provincial government has an obligation to consult and accommodate with Aboriginal interests," Helin notes.

"They also very clearly said that this obligation is not borne by the corporate community. The way this ruling has been interpreted is that it gives the Aboriginal community significant input into decisions about natural resources throughout the province. It is in everyone's best interests to determine a means to get Aboriginal people involved in the economy."

Since its inception in 1989, NITA has organized more than 80 local and national events to promote interaction and communication between the Aboriginal and business communities.

An Aboriginal Blues night featuring local Aboriginal artists and entertainers will highlight the conference.

Web Watch: [www.native-invest-trade.com](http://www.native-invest-trade.com)

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