

Cree looking to benefit from northern development

KEY AREA FOR MINING Leaders say: Provide jobs and protect environment

QUEBEC CITY – The sight yesterday of Cree leaders at the province’s major mining conference was unprecedented but not altogether surprising.

Exploration companies – which have spent millions of dollars probing the James Bay region in recent years, discovering minerals with multibillion-dollar potential – and the Quebec government have come to view the territory as a promised land ripe for development.

But development requires the co-operation, if not the blessing, of the Cree.

During a special presentation to Quebec Exploration 2008, Matthew Mukash, grand chief of the Grand Council of the Crees, dictated the Cree’s bottom line.

“We want the employment and business opportunities (that resource development offers), and we are determined to do what it takes to ensure these potential (mines and mining infrastructures) are developed with our committee’s interests front and centre,” Mukash told several hundred people.

Reaching an agreement between miners and Cree isn’t fast or easy, delegates were told. For example, for two days a month over the past 18 months, Goldcorp Inc. officials have been meeting with representatives of the Cree community of Wemindji and the Grand Council – along with lawyers for all parties – in an attempt to work out an understanding concerning the impending development of a gold mine.

The target date for completion of the “collaboration agreement” is March, Goldcorp executive Claude Lemasson said. After that, the company will release its environmental and social impact assessment, which could lead to a mine permit.

A key challenge for the group is to find common ground between the community’s vision of the mine and the company’s, Wemindji Chief Rodney Mark said.

An agreement between the Cree community of Mistissini and Inmet Mining, owner of the Troilus gold mine, “has generally been positive,” Mistissini Chief John Longchap said. It revolves around employment opportunities, training and protection of the environment, delegates heard.

Almost 60 per cent of the \$430 million spent in 2007 on mineral exploration in Quebec last year was spent in northern Quebec, Virginia Mines president André Gaumond told delegates.

Not only is James Bay poised to be a major mining camp, “it is the future of our industry,” he said.

The area has proven to be rich in gold, iron ore, uranium, diamonds and an array of base metals, added Gaumond, who pegged the discovered value of the known deposits at more than \$10 billion.

Mines that open there have access to the cheapest hydro-electricity in the world, he said. There are roads, eight airports, 10 villages and a range of services.

Premier Jean Charest’s recently announced plan to protect Quebec’s north will only accelerate development in the region, Gaumond said.

That development can only serve to expand the mining-related businesses already established by Cree “pioneers” like mining promoter and former Mistissini police chief James MacLeod, another of yesterday’s speakers.

“We were there first and we would like to see some work,” he told the conference. “We welcome more exploration and development on our territory and we look forward to working with you.”