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UNVEILING - Government and private-sector representatives were on hand in Whitehorse this morning to unveil a new information booklet to help aboriginal communities understand the mining business. (l to r) Jerry Asp, vice-president of the Canada Aboriginal Minerals Association, Patricia Dillon, president of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, Gary Lunn, federal minister of Natural Resources Canada, Gordon Peeling, president of the Mining Association of Canada, and Gary Nash, assistant deputy minister to Lunn. The booklet was unveiled as part of the Energy & Mines Ministers Conference 2006.

Stronger aboriginal ties needed: mining group

It's imperative the mining industry enhance its relationship with aboriginal communities, says the president of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada.

This morning, Patricia Dillon told delegates in Whitehorse for the Energy & Mines Ministers Conference 2006 that the importance of the aboriginal community to the industry can't be ignored.

The aboriginal population represents the fastest-growing labour pool in Canada, she pointed out during a press conference to unveil a new 100-page booklet - Mining Information Kit for Aboriginal Communities.

"We in the mining community have to tap into this incredible resource," Dillon said. "Our success and future depend on it."

Dillon emphasized that aboriginal people have been part of Canada's mining industry from the very beginning.

Skookum Jim, of Carcross-Tagish descent, was among those who kicked off the Klondike Gold Rush that underscored the significance of the mineral industry to the country, said Dillon. She works as the manager of corporate relations, environment and corporate affairs for Teck-Cominco Ltd.

Gary Lunn, the federal minister of Natural Resources, said this morning he was delighted to share the podium with representatives of the mining industry for the launch of the information kit.

"They understand what mining means to the North, to all Canadians, and they have a clear understanding of the opportunities mining can create," Lunn said.

The booklet, he added, is an example of what can be achieved when government, industry and communities work together.

Lunn said he's committed to ensuring "benefits of mining are distributed to members of the community whose lives are touched by these developments."

The mining industry not only provides well-paying jobs, but it brings added infrastructure and generally strengthens communities, he said.

Lunn also mentioned the enormous labour shortage facing a number of sectors and how aboriginal communities will be key in supplying the workforce.

"We need the aboriginal community more than they need us, so I welcome this initiative."

Jerry Asp, former chief of the Tahltan First Nation, was among those who helped develop the booklet, and also spoke this morning at the unveiling.

Asp said the booklet is a much-needed source of information for aboriginal communities whose residents are too often ambushed by misinformation and scare tactics from environmental groups pushing their own agendas.

Recent division among members of the Tahltan First Nation over a mining initiative that led to a road blockade was driven by misinformation from the environmental movement, he said.

The information kit is not a pro-mining propaganda sheet, but simply the facts, said Asp. He said it will provide communities with an understanding of the process from the start to the end, and the opportunities that may be available.

Asp said he is not pro-mining but pro-development.

As the former Tahltan chief, without the instrument of development, he would have had nothing to do but push paper around to administer the first nation according to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Development, he said, has seen the Tahltan Development Corp. prosper and graduate 18 journeymen carpenters, for instance.

The development corporation has a large aboriginally-owned trucking outfit, once the largest in western Canada, and still boasts the largest aboriginal catering business this side of Lake Superior.

"And that was all because of mining," he said.

Partners to the publication will be in Vancouver Thursday and Friday to discuss funding for three regional workshops - western Canada, central and eastern - to begin spreading the booklets and explaining the information it contains, Asp said.

He said the regional workshops are only the beginning of distributing the booklet and the information, and that there will be countless smaller workshops in specific areas in years to come.

Gordon Peeling, president of the Mining Association of Canada, said the mining industry is the largest private-sector employer of aboriginal people.

"The industry sees aboriginal people as key to our business and critical to our future," Peeling said. "I hope aboriginal people right across the country find the information useful and informative."

According to statistics provided this morning, the 2001 census saw a 21 per cent jump in the number of aboriginal employees in the mining sector, representing 5.3 per cent of the total workforce in the industry.

Another increase is expected in the 2006 census, according to information provided.
