

Mining training program faces shutdown

More workers than ever are needed for new projects, but funding challenges could exacerbate an existing labour shortage

By Joel McKay

The future of a crucial training program to get B.C. First Nations off the reserve and into well-paying careers remains unclear as funding for the **BC Aboriginal Mine Training Association** (BC AMTA) runs out.

Earlier this month, BC AMTA said it would begin a formal shutdown process December 1 if the federal and provincial governments failed to financially support the industry association.

A shutdown would mean that at least 800 aboriginals who have applied for BC AMTA's training programs would be cut loose, furthering already-high unemployment rates in aboriginal communities.

It would also mean that mining companies, which are quickly ramping up production in B.C. and already facing a labour shortage, would have an even more difficult time securing workers to support their operations.

"The impact is clearly that aboriginal communities will once again be left out of a system that is really geared toward those with an education ... it will perpetuate the situation for communities that are living in poverty," said **Laurie Sterritt**, executive director of the BC AMTA.

The **Association of Mineral Exploration BC**, the **Mining Association of BC**, **First Nations** and some of the province's top mining companies launched BC AMTA two and a half years ago to improve aboriginal employment and find long-term workers for the province's next major mines.

The association received \$4.4

million in funding from the federal government, as well as cash, equipment and land from associations and companies to get it started.

But BC AMTA needs at least \$2.5 million more per year in funding if it's to stay afloat, and another \$2 million per year on top of that if it hopes to expand beyond the Interior and Nechako regions of B.C.

When asked how the association planned to justify its need for the money, Sterritt said the results so far speak for themselves.

"It's been tremendous," she said.

To date, 222 aboriginal people have found work at well-paying mining jobs after graduating from BC AMTA's programs.

Sterritt said the programs, which train candidates for entry-level positions as well as occupation-specific training, have attracted workers from more than 120 Indian bands across the province.

So far, 98% of the candidates who are accepted into one of the BC AMTA's programs have seen it through.

"This is the thread of hope to them that they will be able to obtain jobs"

- Ann Wallin,
human resources manager,
New Afton, New Gold

And the salaries and benefits graduates are collectively making have exceeded \$11 million per year, Sterritt said.

For **New Gold** (TSX:NGD), which is building the New Afton underground gold and copper



DOMINIC SCHAEFER

BC Aboriginal Mine Training Association executive director Laurie Sterritt says if her program is shut down it would mean more unemployment in aboriginal communities

mine near Kamloops, BC AMTA programs have been essential to success.

New Afton's employee count has climbed to 350 workers from 50 two and a half years ago. Today, 21% of that workforce consists of graduates from BC AMTA programs.

"I see BC AMTA as an extension of the HR department here, they really helped source great candidates," said **Ann Wallin**, human resources manager at New Afton.

Sterritt said workers have not only gone on to find jobs in mining-related positions, but also as caterers, launderers and construction workers that support mines.

Wallin said the BC AMTA program helps the company improve its relationship with local First Nations, and find workers who want to stick around.

In the past, the company has sourced employees from across the country.

Because of the industry's tendency toward remote locations, those workers often don't stay on the job very long because they want to move back to more urban environments.

But BC AMTA's candidates have helped New Afton secure workers for the long haul.

"They're committed to the local community, they've grown up here, their families are here," said Wallin. "If you have people who are working and living in the community then they're really engaged in helping make it successful."

Kamloops Indian Band Chief Shane Gottfriedson said BC AMTA has helped numerous members of his community improve

their skills and land jobs, adding that they now have skill sets that could be transferred to any other mine in the world or to entirely different industries.

But if BC AMTA were to close its doors, applicants from his community who have little or no experience in the industry might be shut out entirely.

"The impacts are that our people are the ones who are going to suffer," Gottfriedson said. "What really needs to happen is government needs to step up because they're ramping up on mining activity in British Columbia."

A cornerstone of Premier **Christy Clark's** jobs plan has been the development of eight new mines by 2015 and the expansion of others, which would require thousands of new workers.

Canada's mining industry is already the largest employer of aboriginals across the country, but should BC AMTA shut down, some 800 people who have applied for training would be left out in the cold.

"What happens to those people?" said Wallin. "This is the thread of hope to them that they will be able to obtain jobs." ■

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