Cultural Program a Leading-edge Initiative for Wuskwatim Project

NCN Member Susan Kobliski coordinates the Cultural Program negotiated as part of the Wuskwatim Project Development Agreement and administered from the Wuskwatim Implementation Office in Nelson House.

“The program is unique in Canada and possibly the world,” Kobliski says. “No other major resource development project that we know of recognizes and incorporates Aboriginal culture as an important element in its implementation.”

The program is designed to recognize and integrate traditional Aboriginal knowledge, teachings and practices to promote understanding and harmony between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers and to acknowledge the importance of the land, water and living things in developing the Wuskwatim Hydroelectric project.

The program has three major responsibilities: Cross-cultural Awareness Training, Ceremonies, and On-site Counselling.

Cross-cultural Awareness Training is Required by All Project Workers

Cultural Awareness is a mandatory half-day program for all workers on site, which incorporates ceremonial, interactive and educational components to help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers understand each others’ cultures and perspectives.

Each session includes: a smudging and opening prayer at the beginning; a session on honouring cultures; a short video on NCN history; a discussion of Aboriginal perspectives on Medicines, Drums and Pipes; a Give Away gift-giving ceremony; and a closing prayer. At the end of each session, participants provide a written evaluation and are required to attend a two-hour follow-up at a later date.

The Cultural Program office schedules 16 sessions per year to provide frequent opportunities to attend, recognizing that new workers are starting on the project at different times. Separate mandatory full-day sessions are designed for project managers that include a Sweat Lodge Ceremony and a Berry Feast.
Ceremonies recognize Aboriginal beliefs that the land, water, plants and animals are all living entities that need to be recognized and respected.

Since the initiative started in February 2007, five half-day and two full-day Cross Cultural Awareness Training sessions have been held, which have been attended by 103 workers.

“Our evaluation forms show a very positive response from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers,” Kobliski says.

**Ceremonies Are Held for Major Project Events**

The Ceremonies component of the Cultural Program has identified 11 categories of project events requiring ceremonies. These ceremonies recognize Aboriginal beliefs that the land, water, plants and animals are all living entities that need to be recognized and respected. Before any construction phase begins a ceremony is needed to give recognition, acknowledge permission and provide thanks to the Creator for the benefits that the changes will bring.

At the outset, ceremonies are required for events like the access road survey, access road and project transmission line construction, stream crossings, borrow pit openings, and discovery of human artifacts or remains. For some components like stream crossings, ceremonies are held whenever a stream is encountered, which has resulted in four ceremonies along the access road route.

As the project proceeds, future ceremonies will be required for the cofferdam construction, the transmission line construction to Herblet Lake, the closing of the river, river-channel improvements, the forebay impoundment and at the time the generating station produces its first power.

“Since NCN is a partner in the Wuskwatim project, it’s very important that we observe the same ceremonial practices we would observe for significant events in the life of our First Nation,” Kobliski says.

**On-Site Counselling Services Available to all Workers**

The Cultural Program delivers voluntary on-site counselling services available to all project workers using two staff – NCN Members, Chris Sawatsky, as traditional councillor, and Joe Moose as workplace counsellor. The traditional counsellor helps workers who may have difficulties adapting to the demands of the project. The workplace counsellor helps with such things as interpersonal problems on the job.

“On-site counselling is very important in retaining workers and making sure they function effectively on the job,” Kobliski says. “For some First Nations workers, the demands of working on the project are different from what they’re familiar with at home. Having the supports in place to help them make the transition can make a big difference in how well or if they will adapt.”

The Cultural Program will operate throughout the entire construction period and will have a permanent office at the main construction camp, including facilities like a sweat lodge for traditional ceremonies.

“Overall the program acknowledges and gives thanks to the Creator for providing the building blocks of the water and land in the way they are located along with the skills that allow us to develop the project to realize the benefits for our people.”
As most NCN Members know, the Churchill River Diversion flooded the original site of the Footprints for which Footprint Lake is named. The site, which is located in the lake near NCN Forest Industries, had important cultural and spiritual significance to NCN First Nation. Prior to the flooding, the rock containing the Footprints was removed from its original location so it would not be lost forever.

As part of negotiations for the Wuskwatim PDA, an adverse-affects agreement was finalized that includes a process and funding to develop and implement a plan for the Footprints.

“Considering the area was flooded more than three decades ago, it’s very satisfying that the fate of the Footprints should finally be resolved,” NCN Councillor and Wuskwatim Portfolio Holder Marcel Moody said. “This process will further contribute to the long-term healing process related to the CRD.”

Planning Underway to Address Future of the Footprints

Initial meetings have been held between representatives of NCN, Manitoba Hydro, the Wuskwatim Limited Partnership, a small group of NCN elders and spiritual leaders and technical advisors to identify issues NCN Members have related to the Footprints and explore feasible and practical options with potential to address the issues.

Planning is now underway to find a way to preserve and make this spiritually and culturally significant rock and Footprint impressions once again accessible to NCN Members in a place of honour and respect.
Committees Give Members Input to Wuskwatim Project

The Wuskwatim Project Development Agreement between NCN and Manitoba Hydro established a monitoring process for various aspects of the Wuskwatim project to ensure ongoing consultation with NCN Members.

Three committees were created: The Advisory Committee on Employment (ACE), the Construction Advisory Committee (CAC) and the Monitoring Advisory Committee (MAC).

**Advisory Committee on Employment (ACE)**

ACE hears and considers employment-related issues and complaints. The committee reviews complaints and provides advice to the Wuskwatim project manager about the appropriateness of job-order qualifications. It also provides advice on implementation of the on-the-job referral process, strategies, materials and processes for cross-cultural awareness training of project workers.

NCN Members on the advisory committee include Alvin Yetman of the Implementation Office and Terry Linklater who works on site.

**Construction Advisory Committee (CAC)**

The CAC is responsible to WPLP and serves to provide accurate and pertinent project information to the limited partners as construction progresses. The committee is consultative and advisory to the partnership. NCN’s members on the CAC receive regular updates on:

- Engineering activity updates
- Number of contracts awarded to date
- Current and foreseeable environmental and regulatory issues
- Current and upcoming cultural events
- Current and upcoming on-site training activities
- Relevant project issues identified by elders, community leadership, NCN Members, project managers and staff.

Through the CAC, NCN’s concerns related to construction activities and management can be forwarded to the General Partner Board.

NCN Representatives include Ed Primrose, Burnell Anderson, Dennis Linklater and Jimmy Hunter Spence.

**Monitoring Advisory Committee (MAC)**

The MAC is consultative and advisory to the partnership. NCN’s members on the MAC receive regular updates regarding ongoing Wuskwatim Generation Project monitoring activities.

Through their participation on the committee, NCN’s members gain an understanding of economic, social and environmental project monitoring. The members’ responsibilities include:

- Receiving regular project updates
- Providing input on monitoring activities and planning
- Reviewing public and regulatory reports.

NCN representatives include Allen Linklater, Bill Yetman and Jimmy Hunter Spence along with four Hydro representatives.
To house more than 160 construction workers currently building the Wuskwatim access road and main construction camp in Northern Manitoba takes a lot of planning and organizing. It currently involves operating two construction camps: Camp R2 located about two kilometres south of Highway 391, which houses close to 80 road-construction workers and Camp S2 located at the site of the main generating station construction which houses about 85 workers. The camps eliminate long daily trips from Nelson House or Thompson. Once the access road is complete next year, the R2 camp will be closed and the trailers and equipment will be returned to ATCO.

Camps Operated by NCN/Sodexho Joint-Venture Partnership

The camps are operated by Sodexho, a major North American food and facility management organization, in a joint venture with NCN. The two camps require about 65 employees to cook, clean and operate the facilities. Most work around the camps is done during the day although meal preparation to meet incoming and outgoing shifts requires longer hours.

Accommodations are Basic but Comfortable

Construction workers are housed in seven 49-room ATCO dormitory buildings that provide about 350 rooms at the two camps. All workers have their own basic but comfortable rooms furnished with a single bed, dresser and a closet. Workers can supply their own TV sets and subscribe to satellite television.

The dorm facilities provide more than 60 private shower rooms, each with a toilet and sink. More than 20 washers and dryers are available for workers to do their laundry although laundering of bedding is provided.

Workers may stay in camp for up to 40 days straight before they take a six-day leave although scheduling has been adjusted for some to align breaks with long weekends and provide leaves of five to seven days.

Wuskwatim road construction operates two 12-hour shifts per day. The day shift starts at 7:00 a.m. and the night shift starts at 7:00 p.m. The busiest times at camp are just before and just after shift changes. Incoming workers arrive for supper just after outgoing workers have finished breakfast. Breakfast foods are served only in the morning and suppers only in the evening.

Meals are a Central Focus at Camps

Construction camp meals are legendary in terms of quantity, quality and variety of food, and the Wuskwatim camp maintains the tradition. The two camps employ about 25 kitchen staff including two chefs, two first cooks and three bakers. Depending on the day, breakfast menus offer a choice of cereals, eggs (fried, scrambled or omelets), bacon, ham, sausage, juice (apple, orange and cranberry), toast (white, rye, whole wheat) fresh fruit, muffins, coffee, tea or milk.

Supper menus offer salads, main courses of chicken, pork, beef, fish (supplied by a northern fish cooperative), rice or potatoes (mashed, roasted, fries and baked). Traditional foods such as bison or caribou are supplied from game farms. To provide variety, the chefs try to provide a selection of popular foods such as pizza, chili and stews. Fresh produce and vegetables are used as much as possible.

Desserts include: pies, pastries, cakes, cheesecakes, cookies and ice cream. Menus rotate on a multi-day schedule to avoid repetition.

Meals are served cafeteria-style to give workers as much choice as possible and a variety of food is available at all times. A selection of sandwiches is prepared for construction workers to take with them during their shifts, along with fresh fruit,
cookies, pastries and beverages. The long hours and strenuous work generates healthy appetites and recently over a one-week period the camps served almost 3,250 meals.

“The road crews are telling us they are having to buy larger-sized clothing, so we take that to mean they like what we're serving,” Sodexho Executive Assistant, Hilda Fitzner says.

Leisure and Recreation Opportunities Available

Recreational facilities at the camps include game rooms with pool and ping pong tables, television lounges, and fitness centres with exercise equipment. Computers with internet access are also available. The camps run commissaries where workers can buy things like tobacco, candy, laundry detergent and rent movies.

Board and room is generally provided at no direct cost to the workers although their employers are billed for their accommodations.

NCN and other Aboriginal Workers Well Represented on Project

A project manpower report presented at the WPLP annual meeting indicates that of more than 350 workers on nine active Wuskwatim contracts, more than 230 or almost two of every three workers (65 percent) were Aboriginal. Of the Aboriginal workforce, about 85 or more than one-third (37 percent) are NCN Members.

Of the two largest contracts, which employ two of every three workers, 75 percent of workers building the access road and 95 percent of workers providing catering are Aboriginal.

“A high rate of Aboriginal participation is so far living up to the goals set out in the Project Development Agreement,” Manitoba Hydro’s Resident Manager John Markowsky said.
The NHFI/Strilkiwski Joint Venture holds the main contract to develop the 48-kilometre Wuskwatim access road. Clearing the road right-of-way was complete to the dam construction site by spring 2007. Development of various stretches of roadway are now at different stages of completion involving rock-pad installation, granular-pad installation, rock cuts, stream crossings, erosion control, right-of-way cleanup and ditching. The rock and gravel base of the road is nearing completion with most of the effort focused on finishing off the last 5 kms of the road. The ditch grading, final road topping and other details will be completed next summer. Other ongoing activities include erosion control and rip-rapping. Slope grading and right-of-way cleanup are more than one-third (35 percent) complete. Ditching is about 30 percent complete along the entire road.

Gravel Being Stockpiled for Finished Grade Next Summer
Laying the finished granular grade will take place in summer 2008 with 100,000 tonnes of gravel already stockpiled at the north end of the access road and a rock crusher now in place to stockpile gravel at the south end of the road. The road is expected to be complete in the third or fourth quarter of 2008. Currently 63 pieces of heavy equipment are dedicated to the project including: 21 rock trucks, 12 hoes, four loaders, 10 dozers, five graders, four packers and other equipment.

Road Design is the Same as for Major Provincial Highways
Because of the heavy traffic the Wuskwatim Access road will carry, Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation (MIT) designed it to the same standards required for a major provincial highway. One difference is the south end of the road will be much wider that a typical highway to allow large equipment to pass. MIT is also responsible for project administration and quality control.

South end of 48-kilometre access road is in the earliest stage of development.

Rock crusher in quarry preparing granular material for finished grade of access road.
Company Strives to Employ NCN Members

As an NCN joint-venture company, NHFI/Strilkiwski strives to employ as many NCN Members as possible with 60 of its 109 current employees (55 percent) from NCN. Another 30 (28 percent) are Manitoba Aboriginals and a further 11 (10 percent) are northern residents. Employee retention has been better than expected.

“Considering the long hours and periods away from home, we were initially expecting a lower worker retention rate than we’re experiencing,” NHFI/Strilkiwski Project Co-manager Greg Bunn said. “We have several workers who have been with us since the beginning.”

Joint Venture Operates Training Program for Access Road Workers

Providing on-the-job training for applicants seeking employment was a requirement for the successful candidate on the Wuskwatim access road contract. Since the project started, NHFI/Strilkiwski has provided 55 applicants with on-the-job training in eight areas of project responsibility including:

- 35 rock truck drivers
- 5 hydraulic excavator operators
- 4 bulldozer operators
- 2 management trainees
- 2 clerical trainees
- 2 safety and environment officer trainees
- 2 drillers
- 1 packer operator
- 2 loader operators.

Because NHFI/Strilkiwski is majority owned by NCN, the company is allowed to direct hire from applicants contacting the office or those working on the Wuskwatim site who express an interest in skilled positions. Most applicants are NCN Members.

“At the outset, we thought we’d be doing a lot more training than we are, but with the high employee retention rate, we don’t often have openings.” NHFI/Strilkiwski Project Co-manager Greg Bunn says.

Operators are working with over 60 pieces of heavy equipment dedicated to the access road construction project.
Besides the road construction contract, which the NHFI/Strilikowski Joint Venture is undertaking, the joint venture was awarded two contracts to prepare and develop the main construction camp and supply and install sewer and water services to the camp.

**Temporary Construction Camps in Place**
Temporary Camp S1 was completed in March and temporary Camp S2, with a capacity of 200 residents, began operating in September although minor piping, insulating, heat tracing and skirting remain to be completed. These camps house workers constructing the permanent camp.

**Most of Main Camp S3 Site Cleared by April**
Major site clearing and timber harvesting started in February and was mostly complete by March 31st except for minor clearing in the contractor and Hydro yards, the sewage lagoon area and along the shoreline. Completion of this work is expected once frost sets in this fall. Grubbing has been completed in all critical areas and the balance will be completed this fall and winter. Most salable timber has been sent to market. The granular base for the entire camp is about 80 percent complete including installation of granular pads for major service buildings such as the fire and ambulance building, the recreation building, the material testing lab, the Hydro maintenance building, the Hydro vault and the water intake building. The concrete reservoir and floors for the main water treatment plant have also been placed and tested. All concrete work was completed by mid-September. Construction of the pre-engineered buildings on the installed concrete pads is now well under way under a separate contract.

**Sewer and Water Infrastructure Advancing**
A temporary sewage lagoon was completed in April with work starting on the permanent lagoon in June involving the stripping of organic material, cell excavation and dike construction. Unseasonably rainy weather this summer slowed construction considerably but the primary cell is complete and is being tested. The secondary cell is roughed-in and will be completed next summer. Construction of the main underground sewer and water infrastructure began in March with installation of the primary sewage line through swamp land to the sewage lagoon. Main sewer lines have been installed to the Camp S3 area. Service connections have been installed to the gatehouse, recreation, and fire and ambulance buildings.

The main sewage lift station is 75 percent complete with electrical and mechanical work remaining. Excavation and installation of water and sewer mains, manholes and other infrastructure continues in the S3 area but the wet summer and unexpected bedrock conditions slowed progress. The raw water intake line and structure were completed in April followed by installation of underground piping to the temporary water treatment plant. Minor plumbing and electrical work along with final water plant commissioning is required before the plant begins operating. Overall the sewer and water installation is 80 percent complete.

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*Water supply intake for Camp S3 under construction at Wuskwatim Lake.*
Main Camp to Offer Better Quality of Life for Workers

The main Wuskwatim construction camp (S3) will offer workers a better quality of life than was available with past generating station construction projects in the 1960s and 70s, Hydro’s Resident Manager, John Markowsky says.

“The quality of life will be better with single rooms, very high quality meals, catering staff keeping all the facilities very clean, compared to sharing rooms and gang washrooms in the early days.

“The camp will have a full-size gym, exercise room and equipment, squash courts, pool and ping-pong tables, TV rooms, ball diamond, soccer pitch, chapel, beverage room and restaurant, and cultural area complete with sweat lodge.”

When the camp opens next spring, it is expected to have a population of around 300, which will expand to more than 600 over the life of the project.

Wet Summer Slowed Other Site Preparation

Besides the main Wuskwatim access road being constructed under separate contract, three other roads at the dam construction site – the Camp Road, Contractor Road and Hydro/Lagoon Road – are all roughed in with a rock sub-grade, although wet weather last summer slowed construction.

Development of roads around the campsite will start once underground sewer and water pipes are in place.

Grading of the Hydro work area is complete and ready for surface preparation and placement of granular base. The Contractor work area and access is currently under construction.

Recreation fields have only been grubbed and rough graded because of wet conditions. Further work will resume next spring, given the lower priority of this facility.

Rock Quarry Supplying Granular Materials for Road and Main Camp Construction

A rock quarry at Km 1 of the Wuskwatim Access Road was stripped and opened in February to supply material for the campsite, roads, building foundations and work areas using blasting and crushing operations as required. A large rock excavation was also completed for use on the raw water intake and other areas. To date, about 80,000 cubic meters of solid rock has been blasted and processed.

The target completion is March of next year, however portions of it will be completed earlier, such as the security building, the engineering office, and kitchen.

“Overall, although slightly behind schedule, crucial milestone dates are being met and the projects are proceeding satisfactorily,” NHFI/Strilkiwski Project Co-manager Don Cook says.

Large volumes of rock are needed as foundation material for roadbeds, buildings and work areas
ATEC Becomes Manitoba’s First Aboriginal Job Referral Agency

The Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre of Excellence (ATEC) in Nelson House has recently signed an agreement with Employment Manitoba that makes ATEC the first Aboriginal job referral agency in Manitoba mainly to serve NCN Members.

Prior to the agreement, ATEC would register job seekers but send their information to Employment Manitoba’s Thompson office, which would coordinate job referrals. Now ATEC can refer applicants directly.

“This is another first for ATEC among many other accomplishments that is making our facility a leader in Aboriginal education and training among First Nation’s communities,” Executive Director Ezra Bogle said.

More Than 700 Members Have Registered for Training

Since ATEC was announced in April 2003, more than 730 people have registered for training, although not all have yet entered a program. Of those registrants, about 200 have so far entered programs in designated or non-designated trades such as carpentry, electrical, plumbing, welding, construction labour, chainsaw safety, ironwork, heavy equipment operating, catering, lathering, mechanics, or security that are or will be in demand for the Wuskwatim project.

Some skills will not be needed on the Wuskwatim project until future stages are underway, which will require some graduates to wait for those positions until they become available. Some graduates have obtained employment elsewhere in Manitoba.

Retention Levels Mixed

The retention rate for students entering ATEC programs varies widely. Mature students seeking to complete their high-school equivalency in preparation for further skill training find the greatest challenge with retention rates of less than half. Skilled trades training programs retain most of their students.

Almost 300 Members Have Registered for Employment

ATEC has registered 275 job applicants prior to the signing of the new job referral agreement. Registrants include both ATEC training graduates and others with existing skills. Of those registered, 39 have been hired on the Wuskwatim project, mainly in labourer, heavy equipment operator, catering and security positions that are currently needed.

“Since our facility opened in May 2006, we’re pleased with how NCN Members have become familiar with ATEC and the programs and services we offer,” Bogle said.

ATEC provides training in non-designated and designated trades, including electrical, to prepare NCN workers with job skills required on the Wuskwatim project.
Most Trainees Are NCN Members
Although ATEC training programs are available to First Nations residents across the north, so far most registrants have been NCN Members.
“Because the ATEC facility is located in Nelson House, it is very attractive for NCN Members because they can live at home while training. Residents from other First Nations must leave home to take training here, which is less attractive for some people,” Bogle said.

New Training Programs Start in the Next Two Months
In the next two months ATEC will be offering Health Care Aide, Carpentry Level 1, and Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) training programs. NCN Members interested in training programs or registering for employment are invited to contact ATEC at 484-2886 in Nelson House or toll free: 1 (866) 614-7686. Speak to Veronica Buck in student services if you are interested in a training program or Fred Prince or Aaron Hart with employment services if you wish to register for employment.

For more information contact:
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