



Sean Willy, right, at English River Treaty Days. Cameco is the country's largest employer of aboriginal people. Photo: Cameco

# Partnerships for First Nations and Métis in the North: A Corporate Success Story

Sean Willy

*Amid the steady stream of stories focusing on tension between resource companies and First Nations communities, it's hard to imagine that other models exist. While Cameco Corporation's relations with First Nations and Métis communities have not been without controversy, the company has a firm policy of engaging with aboriginal stakeholders as full partners in business, education and prosperity.*

An upswing in First Nations and Métis protests against specific resource developments in Canada has led some to suggest that proposed resource projects anywhere in the country could face long delays or be cancelled outright because of lack of support from First Nations and Métis communities.

As the director of corporate responsibility for Cameco Corporation, one of

Canada's largest publicly traded mining companies, I have a much different take on the issue.

Based on our company's experience, we are optimistic that partnerships can be developed and strengthened when aboriginal communities are proactively engaged in a resource company's success. For more than 25 years, our company has been steadily building these types of relationships with First Nations and Métis communities through innovative corporate responsibility initiatives.

Today, about half of those who work at our mine sites in northern Saskatchewan are of aboriginal background. Support for Cameco's operations is at about 75 per cent and we continue to find ways of cementing our relationships with northern people.

**T**his positive relationship may seem counter-intuitive to those not familiar with Cameco in that we mine and mill uranium in Saskatchewan, the first step in supplying nuclear fuel to the world's nuclear reactors.

While a number of prominent, globally influential environmentalists have recently changed their views on nuclear power and now see it as an essential element in battling climate change, most of the industry's long-time opponents seem unlikely to ever be swayed by these new arguments. At almost every opportunity, they demand government policymakers wind down the nuclear industry. That includes a cross section of activists in Saskatchewan demanding uranium mining be halted, including a group of protestors who demonstrated outside Cameco's recent annual general meeting.

Despite this ongoing activism, overall support for the continuation of uranium mining ranges from 75 to 80 per cent in Saskatchewan, including among people in the province's north. Long-established industry polling on support for uranium mining was recently corroborated by a University of Saskatchewan poll on the subject.

At Cameco, northern engagement programs have evolved to a five-pillar

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approach that has been studied and emulated by other resource companies throughout Canada. The five pillars include workforce development, business development, community investment, community engagement and environmental stewardship.

Obviously, high-paying jobs are one of the primary benefits. About 1,300 people of aboriginal descent work at our operations, making Cameco the leading industrial employer of aboriginal people in Canada.

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Many of our First Nations and Métis employees still live in the relatively isolated communities in which they grew up. They benefit from our fly-in, fly-out work schedules where people live at the mining camps for one to two weeks before heading home for an equal amount of time with their families. This enables many of our employees to maintain aspects of their traditional culture while participating in a non-traditional, wage-based economy.

**A**n equally important pillar of our program is business development. Northern, aboriginal-owned companies have strong ties to our operations as either permanent contractors or preferred contractors on our capital construction projects. Since 2002, more than \$3 billion in contracts have been signed between Cameco and 18

different northern and aboriginal-owned suppliers and contractors.

What hampers Cameco and our employee base is that formal trades training programs are located in educational institutions hundreds of kilometres south of where our people live and work. However, through our own programs of offering post-secondary support to existing employees and working with regional colleges and others to overcome the distance education issue, we are finding ways to advance more of our northern aboriginal workforce into skilled positions.

Cameco personnel are constant visitors to the region's high schools, outlining the skill set our operations require and encouraging educational achievement. We also provide tens of thousands of dollars in annual scholarships to northerners who are pursuing post-secondary education.

As our company's president and CEO Tim Gitzel has pointed out, the lasting legacy of our industry in northern Saskatchewan may well be the change in attitude on the importance of education and the desire by young people in our northern communities to pursue higher learning. If their ultimate destination is not the mining industry, many others have pursued careers in teaching, law and medicine, providing long-term inspiration and benefit to others in their communities.

One of our northern policy pillars is to build understanding and capacity of how uranium mining and milling works and how our company protects the local environment.

**A**s part of the nuclear industry, we are among the most regulated industrial sectors in Canada. While our environmental monitoring programs provide sci-





Raisebore operator Darryl Bird. Photo: Cameco

entific proof to regulators that our emissions are well below limits and the environmental performance of our operations sound, there is a need to build capacity among community members, including elders, to understand and trust that this is so.

One of the ways in which we have done so over the years is through our support with community-based organizations such as the Athabasca Working Group (AWG) and the Northern Saskatchewan Environmental Quality Committee, which receive regular updates on our environmental performance.

As well, third parties such as the AWG and the province's Eastern Athabasca Regional Monitoring Program are provided financial support to sample the air, plants and water near downstream communities. This model of community-based environmental sampling conducted independently of the companies that fund it is another example of corporate outreach in Canada.

Most importantly, the community testing program samples representative animals and fish to show that "country foods" harvested anywhere in northern Saskatchewan are perfectly safe to eat. This gives our northern employees confidence that the industry providing their livelihood is not harming their ability to enjoy a healthy, traditional diet.

In more recent years, Cameco has built on previous commitments such as the 1999 Impact Management Agreement in the Athabasca Basin by pursuing more detailed socioeconomic deals with specific rights-bearing communities. We have called these Collaboration Agreements—CAs, for short.

So far, we have signed two such deals. One is with English River First Nations, whose traditional territory would encompass land around our existing McArthur River and Key Lake operations. The other has been with the largely Métis community of Pinehouse.

Both of these agreements have contained provisions for cash payments, which are tied to our production, to a community trust that would see all people in the community benefit. This is in addition to the economic gains from increased employment and business relationships with Cameco.

Cameco continues to work with other communities to expand the agreement model. We believe in the long-lasting benefits to communities provided by the business and workforce commitments in these partnerships. These, in turn, will foster additional educational and career development among community members.

In the most recent *Policy* magazine, former prime minister Brian Mulroney writes that in order for Canada to take full advantage of our natural resource potential there needs to be a "principled partnership with First Nations and the provinces that moves beyond grievances from the past to opportunities for the future."

We couldn't agree more. **P**

*Sean Willy is Director, Corporate Responsibility, for Cameco Corporation, based in Saskatoon. He has worked in the mining industry for the past 19 years throughout northern Saskatchewan, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. He is a member of the North Slave Métis Alliance of Yellowknife, NWT.*  
[sean\\_willy@cameco.com](mailto:sean_willy@cameco.com)