

Aboriginal chiefs pitch business deals to China

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BEIJING - Amid the well-tailored suits and silk ties of Canada's business elite, Chief Calvin Helin stood out in his family's red and black traditional robe.

The president of the Native Investment Association and 25 First Nations chiefs and representatives are on a historic 12-day trade mission to China.

They joined forces here this week with four provincial premiers and more than 100 Canadian business people who are on their own trade missions in China, and tapped into the seminars and meetings the politicians had arranged to drum up business, capital and investment. It suited the aboriginal leaders perfectly since their aim is to find partners and expertise to help develop natural resource-based industries on their newly claimed lands.

"We have huge tracts of land that are rich in natural resources and ripe for development, but there is a need for infrastructure," Helin told an audience of Chinese businessmen. "Our lands are full of oil, full of diamonds, full of iron ore."

Pitching their wares on the world stage is new to most of the aboriginal leaders, but they've honed their message to appeal to the resource-hungry Chinese. The sweetener in every deal, Helin said, is "direct access to our natural resources."

"The biggest source for uncertainty for developing natural resources in Canada is aboriginal land claims," he told them. "If aboriginal people are your partners, that uncertainty disappears."

Chief Glenn Hudson of Manitoba's Peguis Indian Band is a member of the aboriginal delegation.

His band has recently been granted land in southeastern Manitoba that has 600,000 cubic metres of hardwood ready to exploit, plus a cash settlement of \$64 million. Another \$126-million settlement is expected soon.



CREDIT: Wayne Glowacki/Winnipeg Free Press

Chief Glenn Hudson of Manitoba's Peguis Indian Band, shown at a news conference in May, said Tuesday that coming to China was 'an important step for us in moving forward. Our future is not only in Canada, but partnering with other countries.'

Hudson said his band, plus 13 others, had lined up a U.S. investor to help it build a \$280-million plant to develop its resources, but the downturn in the economy scotched the deal. Some 800 expected jobs went down with it, but not the dream.

"We are looking at trying to find a way to utilize this wood supply and that is the reason why we are here."

"We're looking for a new investor," he said.

Hudson said coming to China was "an important step for us in moving forward. Our future is not only in Canada, but partnering with other countries."

The premiers' delegation is peppered with some of the most famous companies in Canada - SNC Lavalin, J.D. Irving Ltd., Pratt & Whitney Canada and Bombardier Aeronautique - and has pulling power with Chinese businesses that the aboriginal mission couldn't possibly match. But what it could do when it piggybacked on the contacts was to stand out in the crowd, and it did.

Helin's presentation began with a traditional native prayer and drew on the shared aboriginal-Chinese experience.

"It is more than DNA that connects us with China," he said. "It is also our practices."

He talked about how the aboriginal experience of living over 10,000 years in one place mirrored the Chinese and how they shared a common respect for elders and tradition.

But Helin is a lawyer and also a strong advocate of aboriginal economic development, and talk of the past quickly gave way to the future.

"Our aim is to lift ourselves up in the same way we have heard China has done in the past few years," he said.

"We are here to do business."

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