

Aboriginal association marks \$1B in Suncor business

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Today staff

Some of the big names in oilsands development gathered at the Sawridge Inn yesterday for the Northeastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association's kickoff to its new educational series.

The room was filled with executive vice-presidents, procurement leads and general managers from all of the region's major developers. Suncor Energy, Syncrude Canada Ltd, ConocoPhillips and Imperial Oil were just a few of the businesses that came out for the start of the series.

Called the Tools for Success Series, members of the aboriginal association will take part in day-long information sessions with oilsands companies. The sessions will be with the companies' procurement teams and will allow the association's members to learn the ins and outs of landing contracts at the various sites.

Nicole Bourque-Bouchier, president of the association, said because native businesses are locally operated they have some unique advantages in the present economic climate.

"We're at an interesting time now in the region and a bit of an economic downturn. What we really see it as is a great opportunity for aboriginal businesses," said Bourque-Bouchier.

The kickoff had representatives from 25 of the 85 members of the aboriginal business association's members. The series is designed to give the native businesses the knowledge to thrive in the current economy.

"Some of the bigger expenses you see from some of the larger contractors aren't so much for the aboriginal companies," said Bourque-Bouchier. "So I think they need to understand what they can do to get their foot in the door right now and that's what this is all about."

The association said they were happy with the turnout, which managed to fill the conference room.

Tyrone Brass, an electrician on contracts with Syncrude and Suncor, said the series should be helpful for the aboriginal businesses.

"One of the toughest parts of obtaining a job with one of the major industries in the area is trying to understand the individual roles and requirements to get a job," said Brass.

Series would be useful, say business reps

Some business representatives said they felt the series would be very useful to them.

"I don't think anything like this has ever been put together and especially nothing like this has been put together at this level with the commitment from the industry people here," said Brass.

The oilsands representatives who spoke at the event all said this was a great opportunity to improve the efficiency in the business relationship between the developers and the aboriginal contractors.

Don Pugh, regional business development manager with Suncor, said there are differences in the processes between the different oilsands developers.

"We see this as a great opportunity for us to let them know what requirements we have. We have a lot of the same requirements, but each one is different it can just make it easier for us to do business with them and for them to do business with us," said Pugh.

The event also acted as something of a celebration for Suncor, which has recently surpassed the \$1 billion mark for procurement of goods and services from aboriginal businesses since 1992.

"It's a testament to the local aboriginal businesses that we're able to do that because it's certainly a partnership, and it's not just contracts, we're very proud of that. We're a year or two behind Syncrude but we're trying to beat them to \$2 billion," said Pugh.

When Syncrude's community business coordinator Steve Jani spoke at the event he pointed out that Syncrude has surpassed the billion-dollar mark a while back and that he welcomes Suncor to the club.

The first Tools for Success session will be held by Syncrude and Imperial Oil on June 15 with registration available to full NAABA members.