



BACKGROUND

Highlights of the OBAC Minerals and Mining Strategy

The Context

The Omineca Beetle Action Coalition (OBAC) was formed in 2005 with a purpose, "To work to ensure sustainable development and resiliency for the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition region". With financial support from the provincial government OBAC is led by a Board of Directors of the region's Mayors and Regional District Chairs. OBAC is working with its member communities, First Nations, all levels of government, industry and sector representatives, academic institutions, and allied partner organizations to develop regional diversification plans that build resilient communities during and after the pine beetle epidemic. OBAC is putting forward long-term strategies that are designed to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

The OBAC region spans more than thirteen million hectares from Smithers to Valemount, and includes two regional districts and their rural constituents, twelve municipalities, and more than twenty First Nations communities. At least fifty percent of our region's forests are pine and thirty-seven percent of the jobs in the region depend directly on forestry. Eighty percent of the mature pine forest is expected to be dead within six years as a result of the mountain pine beetle epidemic currently afflicting the forests of central BC.

The purpose of this strategy is to identify what actions need to be taken by the provincial and federal governments in order to support responsible and sustainable growth in the region's mineral exploration and mine development sector. This strategy also identifies what actions local governments, First Nations, and industry leaders can take individually, collectively and in concert with senior governments to achieve this goal. The region has a number of existing mines, and an overall high potential for future development of mineral resources. There is currently a high level of demand worldwide for minerals, and this demand is expected to continue to grow. The Minerals and Mining Strategy is the first of the twelve identified strategies to be developed, in part because this sector has very strong potential to sustain and strengthen the region's economy.

The communities of the OBAC region look forward to working with the minerals and mining sector and welcoming the growth of this robust and responsive sector in our region.

The Vision

The communities of the OBAC region envision an active, vibrant and diversified mineral exploration and mining industry as part of their future, offering multiple education opportunities to develop the interest and skills required for mining and exploration activities with innovative and sustainable mining practices being accomplished through effective communication, strong relationships and multiple partnerships.

This vision focuses on economic diversification and development of a region where residents can live, work and train, inclusive of an active mining industry.

The vision also sees a region that is an environmental leader through best practices for mineral exploration and mining activities, has the infrastructure needed to further develop the sector, and offers multiple mining education and training opportunities to educate and encourage an active and involved labour force. The future of the region should also feature improved communications and strengthened relationships between the regions, province, federal government and First Nations. This will help to ensure fair and effective management of the resources and that regions and affected parties are directly involved in decisions relevant to their communities.

In 10 years time, OBAC communities want to be the home to a robust mineral exploration and mining sector that is characterized by:

- Objective 1.** Strong partnerships between First Nations, local communities and governments;
- Objective 2.** Regional infrastructure that supports mining;
- Objective 3.** Respect cultural and environmental values;
- Objective 4.** An improved and streamlined permitting and project approval process;
- Objective 5.** The ability to train and retain the required workforce;
- Objective 6.** Increased public awareness and understanding of mineral exploration and mining;
- Objective 7.** Recognition globally as an industry leader in safe and sustainable mining;
- Objective 8.** Industry knowledge of the commercially viable resources in our region.

In order to achieve this vision and these objectives, this strategy identifies seven recommendations and 24 actions that are proposed to mobilise on these recommendations which, if implemented, will enable the OBAC region to achieve its vision objectives mentioned above.

The Opportunities

For decades, the “wealth” of this region has been in trees; but the region is also rich in underground resources. In the face of challenges to the forestry sector and the global increase in demand for mineral resources the time is ripe to expand and grow the minerals and mining sector in the OBAC region. New geoscience information and the exploration based on that information points to our region’s significant potential for further growth in minerals and mining. More work must be done and an investment made in the fundamental building block to mine development - find the valuable mineralized rocks and use this geoscience information to attract new private sector investments in development.

The OBAC region is also rich in human resources, with a well established work force that has many of the skills, developed through forestry work, that can be transferred to the minerals and mining sector. Helping people to adapt to a changing work environment using their existing skills as an asset that can be transferred from forestry to the minerals and mining sector is an important immediate step that needs to be taken to grow the sector. There is also strong potential for First Nations to gain benefits from this development by training and retraining to meet the skilled labour needs in mineral exploration and mining; in fact, the Mining Industry nationwide is actively courting First Nations members to fill the 100,000 mining industry jobs that are expected to open in the near future.

The OBAC region has a real advantage in being able to capitalize on these opportunities by having post-secondary programs geared specifically to the sector; in particular, the Northwest Community College School of Exploration and Mining is one of a very few institutions in Canada offering this kind of education. The School has been effective in attracting First Nations students into the field as well; over half the graduates of the School are First Nations members.

In terms of safe and sustainable mining practice, the region is home to cutting edge knowledge in acid rock drainage, and has the potential to develop into a centre of excellence in safe mining and reclamation practice.

The Recommendations - Overcoming Barriers, Seizing Opportunities

While many assets position the OBAC region to welcome this sector to the region, there is work to be done to make it happen. While there are no guarantees, we are confident that if we follow the recommendations and actions in the strategy that mine development, jobs and sustainable wealth will follow. Implementing these recommendations and actions will go a long way towards achieving the vision and increasing the probability of opening one or more new mines sooner rather than later.

OBAC recommends that local and First Nations governments, the Provincial and Federal governments, industry, the knowledge transfer and educational institutions and interest groups take action together to implement the following seven recommendations to grow this sector in the OBAC region to the benefit of all:

Recommendation 1:

OBAC Local governments and First Nations governments work together to identify regional and local expectations and needs.

Recommendation 2:

Maintain and improve regional infrastructure to help mining activity and to strengthen the OBAC region overall.

Recommendation 3:

Build upon existing expertise to become a centre of excellence for minerals and mining post-secondary education.

Recommendation 4:

Increase public education and raise awareness about sector activities and benefits.

Recommendation 5:

Achieve excellence in safe and sustainable mining practice, knowledge and expertise.

Recommendation 6:

Improve and streamline provincial and federal permitting processes and procedures.

Recommendation 7:

Encourage and support geoscience activities to further identify viable resources in the region.

It is important to note that while all seven of these recommendations are important, Recommendations 1 and 2 are particularly important in creating a positive socio-political environment in which to attract and grow this sector. It is also important to note that each OBAC community has different opportunities, assets and challenges and as such, each community's unique circumstances will need to be considered when acting upon these recommendations.

Out of each recommendation flow several specific actions, some of which are short-term and can be accomplished within a year, and other, more long-term actions, that may take five years or more to accomplish. The detailed actions, rationales, and timelines are presented under each of these recommendations in Section 6 of the full strategy.

Further engagement with and between leaders of OBAC communities and local First Nations to identify regional and local level interests and opportunities is a very high priority for the initial implementation phase.

Other important actions address the need for improved infrastructure, a diverse and skilled labour force and removal of administrative barriers. These actions include: maintaining priority forestry roads, upgrading airports, improving access to three phase electrical power, enhancing the Geoscience information base, establishing a post-secondary mining program to provide a trained workforce with roots in the region, streamlining the permitting process, and providing tax and other incentives to attract new mining interest to the region.

There are 24 actions proposed across these recommendations that can be taken to build a welcoming environment for responsible mineral exploration and mine development. Some selected actions where the provincial government can lead or make an important contribution include:

- Convene a forum for First Nations, local community governments, and industry to discuss overall development goals and options and develop a mechanism for continuing dialogue.
- Undertake a detailed evaluation of priorities for infrastructure improvements which will support the development of minerals and mining in the region. These include: Assess the feasibility of smelter options; Evaluate "green" infrastructure options; Upgrade the Mackenzie-Fort St. James connector road; Electrify the Highway 37 corridor.
- Delay decommissioning of forestry roads and other infrastructure and determine priority roads to be maintained.
- Review the Labour Market Task Force recommendations and provide support to the recommendations that will: Address labour market needs, skill shortages, and improve recruitment and retention; Address training and skill upgrades needs.
- Strengthen junior school programs to raise awareness of the industry and fund post secondary programs to train for the industry in the north
- Prepare and provide general public information that provides a fair, balanced and realistic picture of mineral exploration and mining.
- Map out current best practice in the region and worldwide with respect to safe and sustainable mining practice and site remediation and provide increased government and industry funding to regional institutions engaged in safety and remediation research and development.
- Establish a streamlined joint (federal/provincial) permitting process.

These actions and overall implementation of this strategy will require key and timely decisions by the Provincial and Federal Governments.