

In-Depth Community Dialogue Key to Haisla Nation's 12-Year \$500 Million Contract

Haisla First Nation and their partner Seaspan ULC have won an unprecedented \$500 million, 12-year contract to build and operate tugs to escort liquified natural gas (LNG) carriers to LNG Canada's \$40 billion processing and export facility currently under construction in Kitimat, British Columbia.

The contract and LNG facility will bring many career and employment opportunities for the community says Crystal Smith, Chief Councillor of the Haisla Nation. The Haisla are about 1,700 people with the majority living in Kitimaat Village on the south shore of the Douglas Channel.

When Smith was growing up there were few jobs options in the village or nearby Kitimat. "Now everything is changed, young people have career options I would never have dreamed of," says Smith.

"The sky's the limit for my kids and grandson."

The joint-venture partnership between the Haisla Nation and Seaspan is called HaiSea Marine, and is majority-owned by the Haisla. Employment and other benefits will also be available to the nearby Gitxaala Nation and the Gitga'at Nation through a transit agreement with the Haisla.

The HaiSea Marine contract involves the design, building and operation of escort tugs and harbour tugs and will require employing approximately 70 mariners and six onshore staff, plus other roles for employees of the partner organizations. "Our communities have lived on the ocean since time existed. It's very significant that we're able to bring more jobs back on the water," says Smith.

LNG is natural gas that is cooled to around minus 160 degrees Celsius and condensed so that it becomes a clear and odourless liquid. LNG Canada's 400-hectare facility at the mouth of Douglas Channel in Kitimat will have two processing units that will cool and condense



The Haisla First Nation village of Kitimaat on British Columbia's north Pacific coast, Canada. Photo credit: John Zada / Alamy Stock Photo

the gas for export markets in Asia. LNG tankers are very large and can carry enough LNG to heat 10 million homes for a day.

Open and transparent discussion with members was absolutely essential to getting 90 to 95 per cent support for the LNG project in a public referendum says Smith. "You can never get 100 per cent, but we'll try to address any concerns the best we can."

Spills were one major issue but experts were brought in to confirm that LNG quickly evaporates during a leak or spill. The construction of the facility also minimizes impacts on bird and fish populations and the local environment. "We've put a huge amount of effort and expense to ensure the environment is protected," she says.

This kind of fully open and accountable communication is not easy to do Smith acknowledged, but was essential to getting strong support for such a large-scale project. It took years of meetings and information sessions with community members including going to where members lived such as Vancouver, Prince Rupert and Terrace. "We wanted to meet face-to-face to answer their questions."

Any community considering a new project should make communicating with members their top priority she says. “You have to have those very difficult conversations.”

The tugs are being built by Haisla Nation’s partner Seaspan, which also has the largest pool of tug masters and engineers as well as state-of-the-art training programs. Escort tugs will guide LNG carriers approximately 160 nautical miles from Triple Island to the LNG Canada’s facility in Kitimat. Harbour tugs provide berthing assistance as well as the transport of material and personnel. They would also be involved in marine emergency response, firefighting and oil pollution response.

Commercial fishing and forestry jobs in the region have declined so there is huge need for new job opportunities. The Haisla have learned from previous economic developments that Smith calls “bad experiences of the past.” So, they took a very cautious approach the entire project. LNG Canada and Coastal GasLink, which is building the gas pipeline to Kitimat, have taken the Haisla’s environmental and other concerns seriously she says.

The tugs won’t be needed until the facility is completed a few years from now. Meanwhile, the Haisla have been focusing on developing the skills amongst community members so they are the first in line for the forthcoming career opportunities. “There will be all kinds of spin offs beyond the tug contract,” she says.

There’s already a big influx of workers, about half from local areas, for the construction phase. That’s only the beginning of the influx of new people Smith says. “We’re going to need more teachers, nurses, doctors and much more.” At the same time, the community wants to maintain a careful balance between short-term benefits and any long-term impacts. “We’re accountable to future generations.”

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“We’ve been calling this ‘the new benchmark’ in an industry-First Nations community relationship.”

