

# ACR Aboriginal Programs Project Program Template

<b>Program Area:</b>	4.0	Community Relations
<b>Sub Program:</b>	4.1	Developing Framework Agreements
<b>Template:</b>	4.1.5	Collaborative Partnership with First Nations
<b>Sponsor(s):</b>	<i>Millar Western Forest Products Ltd.</i>	

## 1. Objective

To support the developing capacity of the Alexis First Nation to participate in the forestry industry and improve the economic and educational prospects of their community.

## 2. Description

Millar Western has signed a broad agreement with the Alexis First Nation to cover a range of economic development, education and capacity building activities on the reserve. This Collaborative Partnership Agreement arises from a 10-year relationship between Millar Western and the Alexis First Nation Band, which has a reserve embedded in Millar Western's Forest Management Agreement (FMA) area; in addition, a number of Alexis Band members work off reserve at the Millar Western plants.

The company managed its Aboriginal relations on an ad hoc basis for many years. Recently, the company has endeavored to establish a long-term approach to working with the First Nations communities in its FMA, an approach that is strategic and is constantly raising the bar in terms of expectations and commitments.

As an initial step the company funded a traditional land use project. A member of the Alexis Band undertook the research, collecting information on the traditional land use practices and sites within its area. This information was intended for use in the management process for the FMA; however, the project ran into problems and was not completed.

To further develop the relationship, the company hired the Canadian Circumpolar Institute to look at communication between the parties. The institute tracked negotiations between the two parties, conducted interviews with both the company and the First Nation and pointed out areas where parties had arrived at different conclusions and different understandings of commitments, based on the same meetings. The institute worked with the parties to bridge those communications difficulties.

The Alexis Band and Millar Western are now in the process of implementing the collaborative partnership agreement. This document will act as an umbrella over a number of economic development and capacity building activities. The importance of signing and formalizing this agreement is that it will signal to all members of both sides the commitment of the chief and band council of the Alexis reserve, as well as the senior management of Millar Western, to enter into and maintain a cooperative relationship based on the understanding of each signatory's needs and rights. The agreement acts to position and entrench the capacity-building process

within Alexis while at the same time educating Millar Western employees in regards to the Alexis culture and obstacles to Alexis economic development. A goal of the agreement is to build a core of people on the reserve who have the business and technical skills to successfully participate in the employment and business opportunities in the forest industry.

Activities under the agreement include:

- Capacity-building activities to support Alexis Band members in improving employment and business skills, including wood harvesting and silviculture activities
- Cross-cultural education for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people, including cultural visits by company representatives to the Alexis reserve
- Educational commitments, including scholarships and hiring summer students
- Development and implementation of an environmental co-stewardship committee to oversee and review all forest activities of both parties

### **3. Implementation**

Some of the key elements for implementation and management of this program are:

- A key issue in developing this relationship over time has been the commitment on both sides. At times a few company employees have not been active in supporting the process, and at times some First Nations members were not interested or able to live up to the band's commitments. The importance of formalizing the process through a signed agreement is to ensure there is a commitment on both sides from the senior levels of each signatory.
- Communications between parties remains a key issue. There are sometimes misunderstandings of commitments and expectations by both parties. Bridging the significant cultural differences is very difficult. Building an understanding among First Nations of the non-Aboriginal business environment and work ethic, and an understanding and respect for First Nations values and culture by non-Aboriginals, are ongoing challenges.
- Capacity-building is perceived as the key to progress, in particular to assisting First Nations workers to move from seasonal unskilled labour to more permanent, skilled jobs. Various approaches have been employed, for example, having First Nations workers work side-by-side with non-Aboriginal workers, or having First Nations workers as junior operators to gain experience. As part of this strategy, the agreement will try to ensure that true capacity building takes place on the reserve. The agreement tries to put in criteria and build in mechanisms to raise the bar, to increase the performance and results over time.
- In negotiating the agreement, having a third party as part of the process was seen as valuable, in particular to confirm the commitments made by the parties. The Circumpolar Institute played this role during the initial discussions.

### **4. Timeframe for Results**

The development of the Collaborative Partnership Agreement started in 1998, and the parties signed the agreement in June 2004. The agreement includes targets and a timeframe for results. However, it is recognized by the company that significant changes in both communities' cultures may take 20 years or several generations to produce acceptable results.

## **5. Measurable Criteria**

The agreement includes specific goals and a structured game plan with performance-driven criteria. For example, there are targets for providing wood to Millar Western, with potential increases in volumes over time if targets are met.

## **6. Budget**

The forestry company estimates that the management of the agreement and related activities cost it about \$250,000 per year. This includes company salaries for consultation and for managing the agreement as well as financial incentives, but does not include standard costs related to contracts.

## **7. Partners and Sponsors**

The current partners have also included the Government of Alberta through Alberta Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development to sit at the table of the environmental co-stewardship committee (implementation arm of the FEDA) to participate in developing capacity building initiatives.

## **8. Experience with the Program**

The parties signed the Collaborative Partnership Agreement; however, the company has had a long-term relationship with the Alexis First Nation. Progress in improving the workforce participation and economic conditions of First Nation band members has been slow. It is hoped that the formal agreement will increase commitment by both parties to setting and meeting targets.

## **9. General Applicability**

The approach of establishing a Collaborative Partnership Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding is appropriate for other situations, in particular where the company has a long-term presence in the community and has the opportunity to employ a number of First Nations members. Most agreements will include similar elements of economic commitments, capacity building and education and training. The details of each agreement will be unique, depending on the interests of the parties.

## **10. Additional Information or Support**

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