

Playing it Smart

Feds pump \$2 million into Placentia Bay pilot project to reduce risk

By **KIRK SQUIRES**

Placentia Bay may be a safer place this year thanks to the introduction of the Smart Bay pilot project.

The federal government will pump \$2 million into the project which will provide access to an integrated information base, including real-time information on ocean conditions, weather forecasts, vessel traffic movements, sensitive areas data, water quality data and other information about coastal and ocean areas.

According to the Canadian Coast Guard's Marine Programs' National Performance Report for 2003-2004, *The port of Come By Chance, Placentia Bay, in the Newfoundland and Labrador Region is the largest oil handling port in Canada. Forty-seven million metric tons of petroleum products were loaded and unloaded at the port in 2003. Come By Chance and Placentia Bay are the busiest areas in Canada for oil tanker traffic, therefore causing the Newfoundland and Labrador region to have the highest risk of large spills and serious ecological disaster.*

Traffic in the bay will likely increase in coming years with the potential for another refinery at the head of Placentia Bay and

the Voisey's Bay Nickel Company (VBNC) eyeing Long Harbour for their nickel refining operation.

"Placentia Bay is one of Canada's most diverse and abundant marine ecosystems, and I am proud to announce the Oceans Action Plan's participation in the Smart Bay project," says federal fisheries minister and St. John's South Mount Pearl MP Loyola Hearn. "The plan is designed to protect fragile marine ecosystems while at the same time, ensuring the sustainable development of Canada's oceans."

Better information

"The best way to describe it (Smart Bay project) is better

information, better decisions," says Ron Newhook, president/CEO of the Canadian Centre for Marine Communications (CCMC).

"It is a demonstration of technology which allows the collection of data and the conversion of that data into real information."

The important element of the project is delivering that current information to people who live and work in and around Placentia Bay to help them make better decisions, explains Newhook.

"A good example of that happened on Dec. 26, 2004, — the same day of the Asian tsunami — there was an oil tanker that nearly ran aground in Placentia Bay. It didn't make the news at the time because of the tsunami but we had a near catastrophe in the bay.

"The bay has already been identified . . . as the most likely place to have an oil spill. Having the right information to allow you to understand wind, wave, tide and weather conditions is of immense importance to the tanker operators and to everyone in and around the bay . . . to make sure we can manage the vessel traffic so we can avoid that kind of catastrophe," says Newhook.

"That is just one example of how this can affect everybody."

Fishermen will also be able to access conditions in the bay before they leave port and make decisions based on that, potentially avoiding weather conditions that could put them in danger.

Newhook says knowing the weather conditions can also help people operating in the bay make simple logistical decisions.

Tankers, when they leave the Bay, have a pilot on board. They often really don't know what the weather conditions are outside the Bay when they start to move out.

"There have been occasions when a pilot who goes on board ends up in Baltimore because the weather conditions are so bad when they come out of the bay that he can't get off. Something as simple as that has implications," says Newhook.

The hub

Initially the system will include the hub and several monitoring positions.

The hub will be located at CCMC headquartered at the Marine Institute of Memorial University.

"We will position buoys in the Bay; one out at the head of the Bay provided we get approval for the exact location from Transport Canada. Within this phase of the project we will have two other buoys in other critical locations. We hope to be able to expand that in the future."

The CCMC will lead the overall system engineering and project management and will partner with three Newfoundland and Labrador-based technology companies.

Each of the local companies will assume responsibility for a component of the project. Data collection and modeling will be led by AMEC Earth and Environmental.

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International Communications and Navigation Ltd. (ICAN) will assume responsibility for the marine operations interface including vessel displays, automatic identification system installation and appropriate vessel and buoy communications.

Earth Information Technologies (Nfld.) Limited (EIT) will take the lead for the information hub, which includes design, development, maintenance and continued expansion of an interactive web-based link and integration of both static and real-time data.

The information received from the buoys located in Placentia Bay will be sent to the hub where it will be processed and made available to anyone who has an interest in it, explains Newhook.

"We believe that will have a very positive impact on reducing the likelihood of catastrophe."

System expansion

Newhook adds this pilot project can be expanded into a much broader system in the future.

"This system is the first phase in a much broader ocean observation system which can collect data below the seabed, at the seabed, the water column and surface conditions. These can have very important implications for managers of the fisheries or other resources that might be there.

"It can have advantages for people developing aquaculture, and for municipalities trying to determine where to put their sewer outfalls. There are all kinds of implications for this kind of system and all kinds of benefits."

There is also the potential of partnerships with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the United States, which has state-of-the-art ocean monitoring systems all along the eastern seaboard.

"Those discussions are already ongoing," says Newhook. "We see this as the first step in a national system that could be linked into systems across the country. It's very timely and complementary to what is happening in other parts of the world."

The plan is to get the equipment in the water this summer with the hub operational by mid-summer.