

Nahanni clears road to past and future

Trail to Prairie Creek being blazed across a path dating back to 1990s

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photo courtesy of Thorsten Gohl



Roadwork opens old trail

Nahanni chief says 'commotion in motion' creating jobs, future for youth

by April Hudson

Northern News Services

Tthenaago/Nahanni Butte

Nahanni Butte elder Leon Konisenta remembers when a logging road a few kilometres outside the community first opened.

The road, which became operational in the 1990s, was only open for a couple years before it was decommissioned, he recalls. In the decades since, the willows and trees have grown over it.

Now, it is being repurposed by the community in order to eventually build an all-season road into Prairie Creek Mine.

On Feb. 23, Konisenta and his son Mike Matou joined a group of workers along the road.

Some of them worked a kilometre or two ahead, slashing the trail open and removing deadfall from the roadway, while others used an Alaskan mill chainsaw to make lumber.

The roadwork has created jobs in the community, with around 12 workers out every day.

Matou, who is the former chief of the Nahanni Butte Dene Band, says the work on opening the logging road has been going smoothly. Cold weather hasn't fazed the workers, who often choose to eat their lunch outside rather than return to the community to eat.

"It's been good working with the youth," he said, adding he and the elders have been showing some of them how to run the Alaskan mill chainsaw. That chainsaw cuts logs lengthwise.

"They had a few practice runs today. I just started a few days ago, learning it myself. The first few cuts were rough but by today it's a lot smoother," he said.

The band originally started taking down standing dead trees for elders, who recently ran out of firewood.

Band manager Mark Pocklington said that prompted Nahanni Butte to declare an emergency, which allowed the band to bypass the need for permits and use a bulldozer to initially open the road so the dead trees could be accessed.

Although Pocklington describes the situation as a "true emergency," he admits it couldn't have come at a better time.

Opening the road entrance with a bulldozer allowed them access to the road with trucks so work could begin in earnest on clearing deadfall and slashing the trail.

He added it should take workers a couple weeks to



photo courtesy of Nahanni Butte Dene Band

Workers haul the youth camp across the ice bridge with a bulldozer.

reach the end of the logging road.

"The advantage is, we have crews out there who now have access, they're on the ground, they can see what we're up against. It's a whole lot better than just talking and relying on satellite maps," he said.

It also allowed them to open the road without fear of being slapped with a cease work order, since permits are often required when heavy machinery is used.

"We're creating hope for the future."

Peter Marcellais

"When you're putting wood straight into your woodstove, you need standing dead trees. This is a road with a number of standing

dead trees along it," Pocklington said.

By mid-afternoon on Feb. 23, the workers had cut 30 two-by-eight pieces of lumber, with the plan to refine them further into two-by-fours.

'Commotion in motion'

The lumber will be used in part to build cabins along the road, according to Nahanni Butte Chief Peter Marcellais.

Marcellais says the plan is to cut a line around the boundary of the band's Indian Affairs Branch lands.

When asked about the band's decision to open the logging road and start work prior to the mine's all-season road receiving approval from the Mackenzie Valley Review Board, Marcellais describes it as "commotion in motion."

The roadwork has stirred up excitement at home as well, he added.

The project is especially important for the community's youth, who are learning the right way to slash trails and will be learning how to conduct GPS surveys, he said.

"We want to make sure

we do everything right so it doesn't come back on us," he said.

Aside from the experience the roadwork is giving youth, Marcellais said it also serves to broaden their horizons and teach them to make healthy choices.

"It's a big world out there," he said.

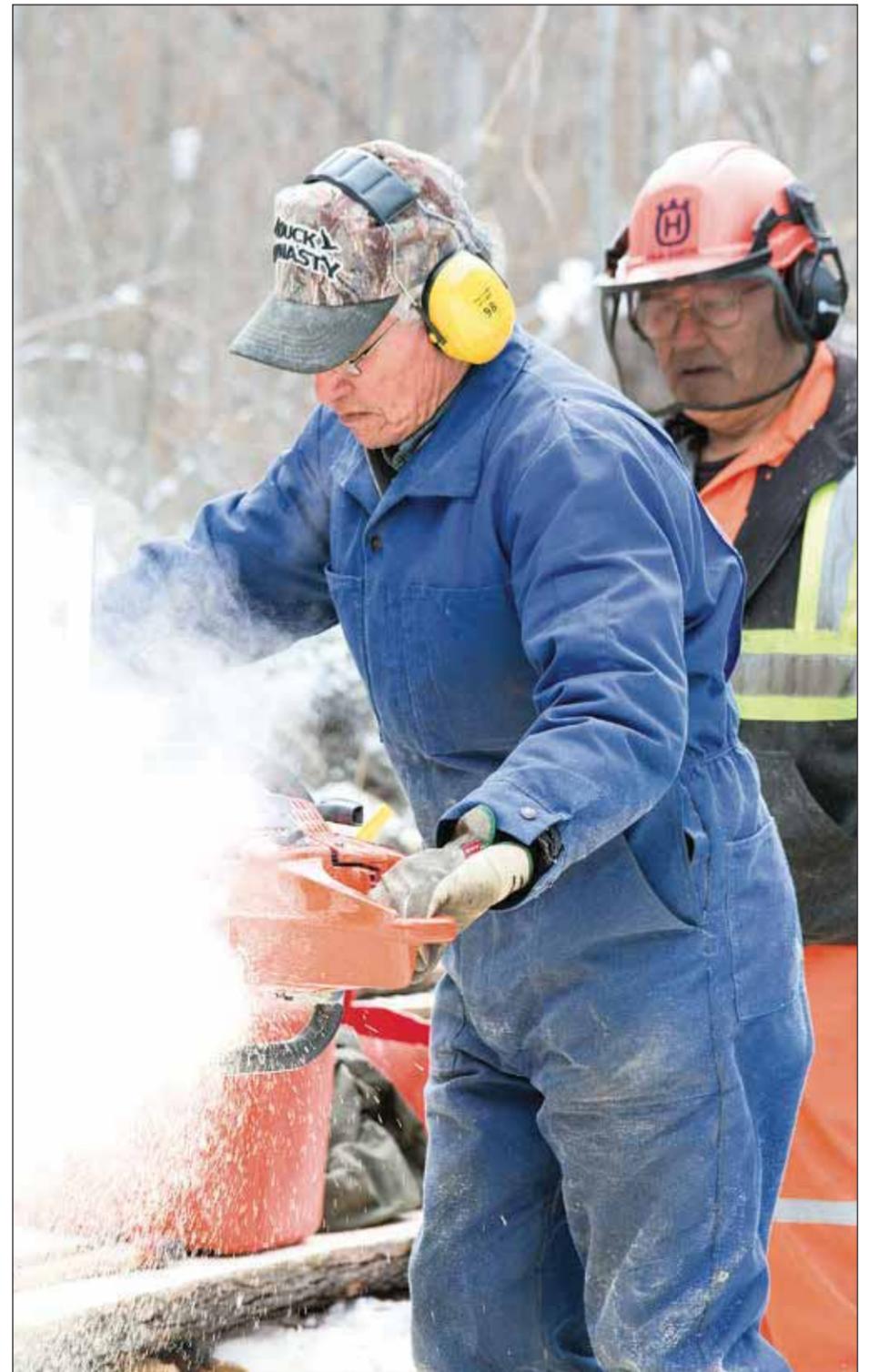
"We're creating hope for the future."

Pushback from feds

Indian Affairs Branch lands are managed by bands in conjunction with the federal government.

On Feb. 21, the Mackenzie Valley Review Board posted a letter from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to Nahanni Butte which states the department "retains the role of final approval of projects and dispositions issued on (Indian Affairs Branch) lands in close consultation with the band."

That letter, dated Jan. 27 and signed by senior program manager Mike Roesch, states the federal government requires a licence of occupation from Canadian Zinc Corporation for the portion



April Hudson/NNSL photo

Raymond Vital and Leon Konisenta run the Alaskan mill chainsaw through a log.

of the road on Indian Affairs Branch lands as well as a surface lease.

In order for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to issue the licence and lease, Roesch states, the Nahanni Butte Dene Band "must first relinquish their interest in

these lands through a band council resolution."

A second letter from the department, dated Feb. 14, affirms the department's "full confidence" in the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board process.

That prompted Marcellais

to respond. In a Feb. 27 letter to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Marcellais writes that if the federal government does not expedite the permitting process for the road, the band has "little choice but to continue the first phase of road construction."



April Hudson/NNSL photo

Workers spent their day on Feb. 23 – one of many – in the bush working to cut lumber and slash a trail. Nathan Betsaka, left, stands with Mike Matou, Qualin Matou, Leon Konisenta and Raymond Vital.