FIRST NATIONS
Centre of Excellence

Dease River Case Study

Building a strong economic foundation through financial accountability: FNCOE/Dease River case study

Summary

The First Nations Centre of Excellence (FNCOE) partnered with Dease River Development Corporation (DRDC) in northern BC in 2025. The DRDC recognized the need for support in improving their financial management systems to build a strong foundation for economic growth. The FNCOE team worked with DRDC to organize the financial management systems to put them in a good position for reporting and being audited, which increased accountability to membership, Crown governments, and funders. This foundation puts leadership in a better position to make clearer, more confident decisions creating a more predictable financial environment.

Additionally, the FNCOE team's work on the financial side prepared DRDC to apply for funding to expand their current core box manufacturing capacity and adding wooden pallet production as a new product to their business model. Through the FNCOE's connections, the team was able to make initial introductions for DRDC to begin partnerships with local businesses and organizations.

Throughout this process, the FNCOE team respected the decision-making authority of DRDC leadership, recognizing that the systems and plans that they built would need to be implementable by the DRDC team.

Background

Dease River is a Kaska Nation located in Good Hope Lake in northern British Columbia, approximately 120 kilometres south of Watson Lake, Yukon. There are 186 members of the community, 38 of whom live on reserve.

Good Hope Lake is accessible by road via the Alaska Highway through the junction to Highway 37 (near Watson Lake), or by driving north from Dease Lake on Highway 37 (the Stewart-Cassiar Highway).

Dease River First Nation operates a store and gas station on the reserve and provides leadership for the Dease River Development Corporation, which holds contracts with local mining companies and other businesses and provides jobs for community members.

Opportunity

Dease River First Nation recognized the need to strengthen its economic foundation. Like many small, rural, and remote First Nations, Dease River First Nation faced capacity constraints and the challenge of adapting to changing industries in their territory. Dease River Development Corporation (DRDC) was proactive in looking for solutions and support.

Connecting with Harlan Schilling and Gordon Campbell at the First Nations Centre of Excellence (FNCOE), the DRDC was ready to build up their financial management practices, develop a strategic planning framework, and build networks to support economic growth. The FNCOE team supported the DRDC through this process by assessing the current state of the financial and economic development situation and working with the DRDC team to make decisions about how to bridge the gaps in a way that moved them towards their economic goals.

The economic development project goals that FNCOE assisted with were expanding existing core box manufacturing (building the boxes used to transport core samples from mines) and adding wooden pallet production to fill market demand at neighbouring mines. The DRDC also sought to make connections with other companies and organizations, including strengthening strategic partnerships with other Kaska economic development companies and BC Parks, with the goal of creating partnerships where they could provide a service or product.

Approach

After initial meetings, the DRDC and the FNCOE formalized their collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This outlined the roles, responsibilities, and work plan, ensuring a structured approach to move forward together. The FNCOE team listened to the Nation's leadership throughout the process to ensure that their vision and values — particularly their relationship to their lands — were incorporated into the MOU to inform the work each step of the way.

Financial management

Together, the DRDC and FNCOE team focused on improving financial management practices, strengthening internal governance systems, and building the capacity needed to support informed and independent decision-making.

Gordon Campbell, the FNCoE's Chief Financial Officer and a Chartered Professional Accountant with decade of experience working with rural and remote First Nations, guided the work. He focused on clarifying financial processes and addressing gaps resulting from limited capacity. He supported the DRDC in getting their financial system ready for reporting to the provincial and federal governments, as well as for annual audits. This laid a strong

foundation for the DRDC to be accountable for its financial decisions, which is essential when seeking investments and funding for projects.

Building systems

The FNCOE's helped to build systems that work for the development corporation's leadership and staff, empowering their own decision-making, and not making decisions for them. The FNCOE team respected the decision-making authority of DRDC leadership, recognizing that the systems and plans that they built would need to be implementable by the DRDC team.

Accessing resources

The DRDC began to address the challenge of limited financial capacity through applying for the funding needed to build a new manufacturing shop and expand the community's existing mill. They also focused on hiring people to bridge the gaps in human resources capacity.

Strategic buildout

Their work also focused on complementary economic development efforts. Through strategic planning efforts and engagement, Goron Campbell assisted the team in identifying economic opportunities that were aligned with the Dease River's long-term vision. Through the FNCOE's connections, Campbell facilitated initial introductions to an industry non-profit to assist DRDC, as well as partnerships with local businesses and organizations.

Results

The collaboration with FNCOE has strengthened DRDC's financial processes, clarified direction through strategic planning, and created a more stable foundation for growth. The FNCOE team measured success based on the DRDC's initial goals. The FNCOE assisted the DRDC to help implement their vision – which was ultimately about making sure that economic development income is reinvested into the community.

This foundation puts leadership in a better position to make clearer, more confident decisions creating a more predictable financial environment. The work remains an ongoing effort. The DRDC continues to build on this solid foundation, attracting partners, gaining better access to funding, and pursuing further economic opportunities.

The FNCOE maintains a connection to the DRDC through the MOU and is available to provide ongoing support.

Recommendations for First Nations governments and organizations

- Strengthen financial systems to improve accountability and investment readiness.
- Build a tracking system to monitor major projects consistently to maintain clarity, accountability, and progress.
- Coordinate across leadership and economic development corporations to remain aligned on goals and priorities.
- Invest in ongoing capacity building focusing on financial and human resources to ensure a strong organization.

Support from FNCOE

The FNCOE provided valuable support and brought a unique understanding of the context and climate that rural and remote First Nations deal with. The team understood the shifting realities that communities need to adapt to, the increased costs that can impact success, difficulties arising from short building seasons, and the impact of loss and grief on a community that can interrupt plan implementation.

They also provided access to broader networks familiar with First Nations. Their free services emphasized financial empowerment and independence and was an "altruistic venture rather than a capitalist one."

> *I've worked with many consultants before this. As a First Nations-led organization, we were confident that the Centre of Excellence's values and goals would align with our own. They offer additional understanding of the context and challenges that First Nations communities and organizations face.*
>
> - Maya Duvage, legal counsel for Dease River Development Corporation

> *Our approach is to listen to the vision and goals of the Nation and incorporate it into business planning. Our work with the DRDC involved getting an understanding of the financial systems to provide a clear picture of the situation. Once we knew what was happening, we could provide the support needed for the DRDC to capitalize on economic opportunities nearby for them to achieve their goals.*
>
> - Gordon Campbell, Chief Financial Officer for First Nations Centre of Excellence


fncoe.ca