

Saturday, October 6th, 2007

Global **\$68 million to fix port, rail line**

Harper's cash infusion a big boost for Churchill, sovereignty of Arctic

Sat Oct 6 2007

By Mary Agnes Welch

'As the world beats a path to our Arctic doorstep, our government is working hard to ensure that Canada is ready to greet them when they arrive'

-- Prime Minister Stephen Harper

CHURCHILL -- After a summer of snubs and stoppages, Churchill's port and rail line won \$68 million for repairs Friday, cash Prime Minister Stephen Harper said will help guarantee Canada's Arctic sovereignty and the future of the northern Manitoba outpost.

Making a rare prime ministerial stop in Churchill, Harper said the cash will boost imports and exports through Hudson Bay, boost tourism and help re-establish Canadian control over the Arctic.

"As an entryway to the great Hudson Bay and the Far North, Churchill has played a major role in northern development throughout our country's history," Harper said from the slightly ramshackle Northern Studies Centre outside Churchill. "Rest assured, as the world beats a path to our Arctic doorstep, our government is working hard to ensure that Canada is ready to greet them when they arrive."

Joined by a gaggle of politicians -- Premier Gary Doer, Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl, Treasury Board President Vic Toews and regional MLA and cabinet minister Eric Robinson -- Harper stopped first at Churchill's research station. Then he toured the tundra by helicopter and got close-and-personal with a polar bear. While at the research station, he revealed the final 26 projects to win funding under the International Polar Year program launched earlier this year. They cover everything from the state of freshwater ecosystems to children's health in the Far North.

The port will get as much as \$8 million in upgrades over the next few years to boost its storage capacity so ships will not be stuck waiting to load and unload grain and other goods.

First to get money is a new bulk storage facility, likely to be used for new imports, like fertilizer, coming through the port for the first time. The first shipment of fertilizer, about 18,000 tonnes from Russia, is expected next week.

However, most of the cash announced Friday -- \$60 million -- will help repair the rail line linking grain farmers all over Western Canada directly to the Port of Churchill and the global market.

The rail line has been battered by years of neglect and by northern elements, slowing trains to a crawl or halting them altogether.

Last summer, the track was out of service for well over a week, stalling trade from the port, stranding several northern communities and stymying tourists en route to visit Churchill's tundra wonders.

Ottawa and Manitoba are each chipping in \$20 million for the track repairs, and OmniTRAX, the Denver-based firm that owns the port and railway, is contributing another \$20 million.

The money is so new that OmniTRAX engineers were in Churchill Friday to start planning which stretches

of the track will get fixed first.

President and CEO Pat Broe said it's too early to guess how many kilometres of track will be upgraded or exactly what that will mean for the speed and capacity of the rail line.

"The big thing is, everybody has to think about a million tonnes," said Broe, referring to the export goal long harboured by the Churchill port.

The small port, which looks like a rusty, post-Soviet outpost, has had a stellar year.

It's expected to export well over 600,000 tonnes of grain, a 30-year high. And it has been ice-free for longer than usual, thanks to global warming.

But Churchill, with a population of 800, also suffered some disappointments this summer.

In an effort to reassert Canada's sovereignty over the North, Harper decided to build a new northern military training centre in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, bypassing Churchill. And he announced that the old Baffin Island village of Nanisivik -- not Churchill -- will serve as Canada's new northern deep sea port.

But there are still worries the cold war between the Harper government and the Canadian Wheat Board could threaten the port.

Grain marketed through the wheat board makes up more than 80 per cent of Churchill's exports, but the Harper government has said it wants to dismantle the single-desk marketer.

Officials from the wheat board were conspicuously absent from Friday's announcement.

Harper said it will be up to farmers to decide the wheat board's fate.

"But the Government of Canada will ensure this port is used and that there are shipments," Harper said.

Premier Gary Doer said the North represents the economic future of Manitoba and Canada.

"This is extremely good news for the economic optimism of this community."

maryagnes.welch@freepress.mb.ca

Churchill Notebook

The PM and the polar bear

A polar bear got more face time with Prime Minister Stephen Harper than pretty much anyone in Churchill.

The prime minister's posse commandeered one of Churchill's tundra buggies Friday, hoping to catch a glimpse of the region's most famous mammal.

Sure enough, a pliable polar bear was spotted lounging in the boggy shores of Hudson Bay and promptly came wandering up to Harper's buggy, stopping just a few metres away.

Beyond that bit of good fortune, the 18-hour visit was remarkably orchestrated, right down to Harper's "thumbs up" from the window of his helicopter. A Harper handler, standing next to waiting photographers, radioed in to the chopper for Harper to deliver the gesture.

Harper and Premier Gary Doer took the helicopter tour over the tundra and the rusty port facility to get a closer look at grain being piped into the belly of a ship called The Clarisa.

The prime minister had lunch with local leaders, but was kept relatively cloistered from average people in Churchill.

Earlier in the morning, mostly for the benefit of the cameras, Doer and Harper perused a collection of relics at the Northern Studies Centre, including a plaster cast of a polar bear's skull and an old radio collar used to track the animals. The duo heard how the collars are just for female bears and slip right off male bears, with their thick necks and small heads.

"You know guys like that," quipped Doer to Harper. "Probably in our caucus."

Trudeau was first, they say

Was Harper the first prime minister to visit Churchill?

Nope. At least folks in Churchill don't think so.

Before his Challenger jet touched down late Thursday night, Harper was widely believed to be the first sitting prime minister to ever visit the northern outpost. He even said so in his speech Friday, prompting some harumphing from the older folks in the audience. It turns out that many people in Churchill -- from the owner of the Aurora Inn to the Anglican minister to an old-timer who attended Friday's announcement - - remember former prime minister Pierre Trudeau's pit stop in the northern town in the late 1960s.