
OPINION-EDITORIAL

SKILLED WORKERS HELP B.C. AEROSPACE INDUSTRY TAKE OFF

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(721 words)

Some of the world's top aerospace companies are doing more and more business in British Columbia. Their reasons are simple. They lie in the nature of the geography and in the industries that drive our economy. Our expansive landscape and diverse, rough terrain has helped make British Columbia a leader in the use, maintenance and repair of aircraft.

To get to B.C.'s capital city from its largest city, there are only two choices: air or water. To get to Prince Rupert, B.C.'s northern seaport and North America's land-sea gateway to Asia, it is a 16-hour drive from Vancouver – or a two-hour flight. For many involved in forestry, B.C.'s primary industry, the use of planes or helicopters is often a necessity. Indeed, to reach many a remote community in B.C. there is no option: you can only get there (from here) by air.

With 16.4 million people expected to fly in and out of Vancouver International Airport this year, we are home to the west coast of North America's second largest international passenger gateway. B.C. is also home to more helicopters, per capita, than anywhere else in the world and second only to Alaska in the number of floatplanes. From these statistics alone, it's easy to see why we have become a hotbed of economic activity and why many aerospace companies want to be a part of it.

B.C.'s strength is its people and its location. Just last year, the world's largest helicopter-service company, CHC, relocated its global headquarters here and Vancouver's MacDonald, Dettwiler and Associates was awarded a contract to develop the CASSIOPE satellite system for earth observation. And this past spring, the newspapers were filled with a flurry of other stories about B.C.'s growing role in aerospace. In March, a consortium led by B.C.'s Kelowna Flightcraft was awarded a 22-year, \$1.7 billion defence-training contract. And the same month, Air Canada announced it had won a large maintenance contract for Delta Airlines, with the work being centred at Vancouver International Airport, creating hundreds of local jobs.

Today, the maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) sector of the industry employs nearly half of B.C.'s 7,500 aerospace workers and generates \$600 million each year in revenue. At the same time, our post-secondary schools produce over 400 highly skilled and motivated aerospace engineers, machinists and avionic technicians annually, helping to fill the industry's emerging needs.

In 2003, B.C. implemented a \$20-million Aerospace Strategy to help support growth and diversification of the industry over the next decade. To ensure we're able to keep up with demand and to make sure students continue to learn using the latest tools of the trade, our government is investing millions of dollars into new aerospace training facilities around the province.

Currently, six public post-secondary institutions in B.C. offer aerospace programming. In addition, at the University of British Columbia, the engineering and materials faculty has world-class expertise in turbine blade design, composite materials, aerospace manufacturing and micromachining.

At the British Columbia Institute of Technology, where over 5,000 aerospace professionals have been trained over the last four decades, the demand for its grads is so great that more than 80 per cent of students find jobs within one month of receiving their diplomas. The polytechnic institution will soon begin construction on a new \$69.4-million, 27,000-square-metre facility (including leased commercial space) for its new Aerospace Technology Campus at the Vancouver International Airport to replace its current training hanger and help keep up with industry demand.

Our provincial government continues to work with our federal colleagues to help promote the aerospace industry in B.C. The federal and provincial governments have a shared commitment to expanding air access in B.C., to expand both tourism and trade opportunities. In the past two years the Province has funded regional gateway airport expansion projects in Comox, on Vancouver Island, in Abbotsford, east of Vancouver, in Prince George, in B.C.'s north, and in Cranbrook, in the southeast part of the province. In fact, dozens of smaller airports in B.C. are receiving funding from a five year, provincial Transportation Partnerships Program that aims to provide critical infrastructure upgrades to these important hubs.

With the 2010 Olympics on the horizon and exceptional opportunities from Asia-Pacific on our doorstep, B.C. is a growing, and growth, market for aerospace and our skilled, specialized and experienced workforce are helping to propel British Columbia forward.