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Province eyes new strategy on ocean technology



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Sector work initiated as Oceans conference comes to N.L.

Deciding which companies in the province are working in the ocean technology sector might, at times, be a tough call.

The sector crosses businesses active in transportation, defence, fisheries and offshore oil. It includes products and services relating to remote sensing, marine communications, system design and offshore engineering.

However you define the sector, Susan Sullivan, minister of innovation, business and rural development (IBRD) says it is growing and it is one of the most important business sectors for Newfoundland and Labrador.

"This, I believe, is going to be one of the sectors that we look to in the future as really leading the economy here," she said in an interview Thursday.

In August, her department issued a request for proposals (RFP), seeking a consultant to profile the province's ocean technology sector. The work is to include "an analysis of strategic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats," according to the call, and will include compiling relevant statistics on employment, sales and standing markets for ocean tech products and services.

"We want to develop as well a very comprehensive directory of ocean technology participants — both those that are operating right here in Newfoundland and Labrador, the ones that are close by as well as the capacities that exist in the province," she said.

The RFP closed Sept. 5 and a contract has yet to be issued.

“We have six replies now that are being evaluated as a result of that RFP and I would hope that some time this fall ... we would be able to announce who the consultant is and the work will get done.”

Similar profiles of the sector were undertaken in 2006 and 2010.

In June 2009, IBRD launched a five-year “Oceans of Opportunity: Newfoundland and Labrador’s Ocean Technology Sector Strategy.” Sullivan said the consultant —yet to be selected — working in partnership with industry representatives and groups such as OceansAdvance and Memorial University of Newfoundland, will feed into the government’s creation of a new multi-year strategy.

But first the government needs to determine exactly what is out there.

Sullivan said the sector profile and larger strategy need to be updated, given ocean technology — like technology in general — is an ever-changing environment. And using a consultant, she said, will offer fresh eyes on the broad view.

The provincial government work comes as the province prepares to welcome more than 1,200 delegates for an international conference relevant to ocean technology: Oceans ’14.

The conference is being hosted by the Marine Technology Society and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers at the Delta Hotel and St. John’s Convention Centre from Sept. 14-19.

“It’ll be a major forum for scientists, engineers and business leaders to really get together and exchange ideas and bring together knowledge about the future of the world’s oceans,” Sullivan said. “But apart from that, it brings to our very doorstep all of these major players from around the world.”

It will also bring them to the Town of Holyrood, where oceans technology has become a cornerstone for economic development. “It is enabling us to diversify and energize our economy,” said Holyrood mayor Gary Goobie, in a statement.

The town will host a lead-in to the conference: “A Day in the Bay,” on Saturday, Sept. 13, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Marine Institute’s Holyrood Marine Base, 2 North Side Road.

It is being promoted as come one, come all — a chance for the public to connect with top technology, locals active in the sector and visiting delegates.

“Pretty much every space possible we’re taking over,” said Natacha Fudem, executive director with the Oceans Holyrood Initiative, who said the event has been about a year in the making.

“(The) Ocean Learning Partnership is doing a live feed with subsea imaging from the boat out in the water. So there’s going to be a lot of interaction from the water to inside of the building,” she said, noting the public will be able to see robots going into the water from the wharf.

Inside, there will be screens showing subsea imaging, but also displays of a new pieces of ocean tech, with the creators, the engineers, there to take questions.