

New director for ice road

Ron Near brings broad Northern experience to the job

by Sara Wilson
Northern News Services
NWT

With some big shoes to fill and a world famous road to take care of, Ron Near has his work cut out for him. He wouldn't have it any other way.

Near is the new director of Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road operations, the lifeline to NWT's three diamond mines.

With 25 years of experience as a police officer with the RCMP, Near has lived in eight of the NWT's cities and hamlets. He said that experience will help him maintain the ice road's reputation and ensure operations run smoothly.

"It's pretty nice, I'm pretty excited about it," Near said. "I've been involved with the winter road for a number of years in different aspects, but taking over the position of director is pretty special," Near said.

The road began as a service route in the early 1980s to import equipment to the Echo Bay mine, better known as the Lupin mine. The road went through many changes as the NWT's diamond boom started in the 1990s.

BHP Billiton's Ekati mine, De Beers Canada's Snap Lake mine and Rio Tinto's Diavik mine all helped transform the road into the high-volume route it currently is.

"If it's built to full length and that would include going up to service Lupin (mine) .. it was close to 600 km," Near said. "In the last number of years the farthest it's gone is to BHP Billiton's Ekati mine and that's approximately 400 km. It's a

very impressive road."

The world-renowned route is maintained by two companies with many years experience in the engineering of ice roads.

"There are a couple of companies that play an important role in the construction and maintenance of the road and the first one is Nuna Logistics, who build and maintain the road, they've been involved since the early 1980s," Near said.

"Their expertise has grown year after year, they're a major component in the success of the road. Then we have another company called EBA Engineering and they are the scientists for the road who do all of our ice studies and anything to do with engineering of the road."

While its not the lone ice road in the world, the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road has its own claim to fame, according to Near.

"There's other ice roads built around the world in Northern climates in Siberia and Alaska and there's others in parts of Northern Canada," Near said. "But I guess the big difference is the majority of those roads are built over land, where the majority of this road is built over water."

That engineering marvel requires high amounts of attentions to detail and safety is the highest priority for the companies that maintain the road.

"It's pretty impressive to see, as far as knowledge of how to build an ice road, there's probably not another

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"There's probably not another group in the world that has as much expertise."

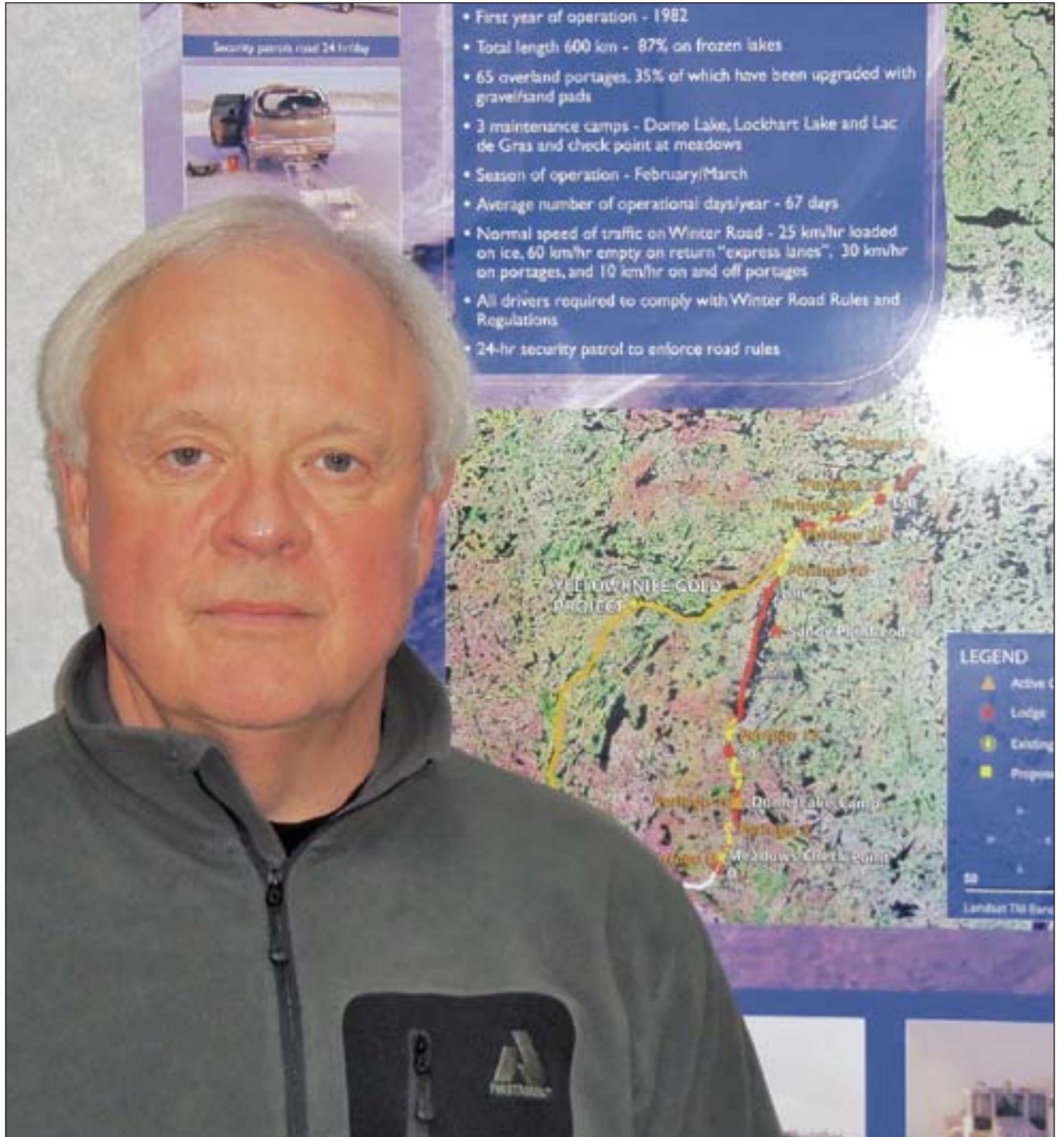


photo courtesy of Ron Near/Rio Tinto

Ron Near is the new director of the Tibbitt to Contwoyto winter road. Near faces the challenges of keeping the road safe for all transport and fuel truck drivers.

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Interesting cargo for this year's ice road

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group in the world that has as much expertise as the groups involved in building this ice road," Near said. "That's from years of learning, sometimes from mistakes, sometimes from working as a group and problem solving. It's gotten to the point that it's a safe road along as you abide by all of the rules and conditions that are placed on it. It's as safe to drive the winter road as it is to any other road in Canada."

Accidents have been reported every year, but no major incidents have occurred

in the road's recent past.

"No, not over the past few years. Every year there are accidents on the road, but they are normally of minor nature," Near said.

"In the modern-day winter road there's never been a tractor trailer commercial vehicle that's gone through the ice. Unfortunately, a number of years ago there were some incidents during construction where equipment had gone through the ice, and there had been loss of life, but that was quite a number of years ago and as I say every time something like that happens we

learn greatly from the mishap and put in areas to improve."

The 2011 figure of 7,389 truckloads was dramatically different than the year previous which recorded only 3,508 truckloads during the winter run.

Thin ice and a warmer-than-expected spring were the factors to blame, leaving the 2010 season open from February 4 to March 21 – just 36 days.

Comparatively the 2009 season ran from February 1 to March 22 a 42-day stretch that saw 4,847 truckloads of equipment brought

into the three mines.

This year is expected to see the same amount of loads using the road, Near said, but numbers are still being collected from some mines.

"I'm still waiting for numbers to come in from some of the mine sites, but it looks like the numbers will be similar," Near said. "I know there will be an excess of 6,000 loads going northbound on the road this year, so it will be similar to last year."

Based on the minimum ice thickness along the entire stretch of road, load weight limits are set. With each addi-

tional inch of ice, the allowable weight increases.

"The road normally starts the last few days of January to the first few days of February but we can't ship full-weight at those times, we have to let the ice build more," Near said. "So we only ship part loads in at that time. Once the ice gets up to an excess of 41 inches for the whole length of the road, we can start sending in full-weight roads."

While environmental factors can't be predicted, Near said he has a plan for just about anything that could happen on the road.

"There's a contingency plan in place for everything," Near said. "We've had a number of warm seasons, it's just the way that it is. The road freezes first in the northern portion and last in the southern portion and unfortunately in the spring when the thaw starts, it starts to thaw sooner on the southern end than on the northern end. The road is only as good as its weakest link. If you have one area that you can't cross on, the road's closed."

"To protect the road, Nuna Logistics has a number of ways that they can maintain a road for longer than it would normally maintained on its own, using things like flooding and building of snow on portages to keep the portages maintained. You can get more time out of a road by working smartly with it."

To welcome Near into his first year as director, Rio Tinto has issued a challenging request.

"Every year there are

always challenges. This year we have one interesting project ... Rio Tinto is shipping four wind towers into the Diavik diamond mine," Near said. "These are big and long and awkward and very sensitive as far as damage. There's huge planning involved in ensuring that these get into the mine site in a safe way."

The wind blades will need to be shipped on a properly-sized trailer to ensure safe arrival of the wind turbines.

"You have to plan out anything that's out of the ordinary. The blades for the wind towers are very long, so you have to make sure that they are on the appropriate trailers and make sure they can make certain grades on the road and get around sharp turns without causing any damage," he said.

But for Near, what's been carried along the ice road isn't nearly as important as the integrity of the road itself.

"My goals are just to make sure this road keeps on running and operating smoothly and as safely as it can, and making sure we continue to look at all options to improve the way the road operates," Near said.

"(To continue) to meet the needs of the three joint venture clients that are involved on the road and also to look at ways to assist in making sure that other small exploration companies that are looking at eventually opening mines off of the main winter road, that we can find a way to continue to let them use it and benefit from its use."

"The road is only as good as its weakest link."

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