



## **New ideas needed for First Nations housing—with forests**

*By Tony Kryzanowski*

As winter sets in, concerns about housing within Canada's First Nations communities are once again likely to get news headlines. It's time to have a serious talk about Canada's First Nations people and their relationship to the forest resource as one way to take a more positive step toward improving the housing and heating situation in many communities.

It's stating the obvious, but we know that many of Canada's First Nations members do not have adequate housing. The question is, should the Canadian government be the ones to provide it in future or is it time that First Nations took more of that responsibility on themselves?

Images last winter of what can only be described as a form of Third World housing in the Attawapiskatt First Nation in Northern Ontario are still fresh in my mind. Having visited many northern regions of Canada in my travels writing for this magazine over the past 23 years, I can say quite candidly that the housing situation at this Ontario First Nation is not uncommon on many First Nations communities in Canada—and it's not just in remote communities.

There are many things wrong with how housing is provided to Canada's First Nations people—but we can start by investigating what is wrong with the system, and then trying to improve on it.

From my perspective, a big part of the answer is Canada's First Nations' communities making better use of the forest resource that is often very plentiful right in their midst. The wood fibre can be used in both log building construction and to generate heat from wood pellets either for individual homes or in community heating systems.

Sadly, too many of our politicians and First Nations leaders look for the quick fix, and there are companies eager to maintain the status quo because there is money to be made for them in prefab, stick-built structures that invariably have a finite shelf life, as demonstrated by the disturbing and embarrassing deterioration of these buildings in many First Nations communities.

What is needed is a more permanent solution where fabrication can take place within the communities themselves, and in my opinion the answer is a transition away from stick-built structures, to more log homes.

There are individuals who are already thinking along these same lines. A B.C. company, Haven TimberHomes ([www.haventimberhomes.com](http://www.haventimberhomes.com)), located in the heart of the Cariboo District in British Columbia, has considerable First Nations involvement in log building construction

The question is, why isn't more of this being done, right within First Nations communities across the country? And why isn't our federal government doing more to encourage this concept as an alternative national First Nations housing strategy?



Just think of the potential for skills training and job creation in First Nations communities alone if there was a genuine commitment by First Nations leaders and the federal government to this housing strategy. Not only will chronically under-employed individuals in remote communities have an opportunity to learn important job skills in building construction, but there is also the potential to create other training opportunities in the plumbing, electrical, mechanical, and equipment operator occupations, all of which are in short supply. The additional dividend is that First Nations residents don't have to leave their communities to find work but can train and work right in their own communities, while providing a vital service.

Perhaps there is also an opportunity to combine a log home building strategy with implementation of alternative energy technology, such as solar, wind, biomass or run-of-river hydro power production.

In terms of providing heat, here again is an opportunity to combine the needs of First Nations with the forest resource. Wood biomass has the added benefit of providing the raw material to produce wood pellets for heating systems and the wood residuals from logs used in building construction could provide some of the raw material to produce them. I am pleased to see that areas such as the Northwest Territories and First Nations-owned companies like NorSask Forest Products in Saskatchewan have already recognized the benefits of wood pellet production, largely for use in First Nations communities.

So instead of taking an annual summer holiday to photograph the glaciers on Baffin Island, perhaps our Prime Minister should show some leadership by opening a serious dialogue on the issue of First Nations housing, and investigate the potential of log home building right in First Nations communities as an alternative to pre-fab, stick-built construction where the buildings are produced elsewhere and trucked in. To me, that seems like a more productive use of his time and a more pressing issue. The problem is not going away.