



Eeyou Mobility connects cellphone dead zones in Quebec

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TORONTO

PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGO

UPDATED 1 HOUR AGO

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Dean Proctor, left, chief development officer with SSi Canada, and Henry Gull, president of James Bay Eeyou Corporation and of Eeyou Mobile.

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In northern Quebec, an Indigenous-owned telecom company is bringing cell service to an area the length of Germany, as part of a broader push to connect Canada's many dead zones on rural roads and highways.

Eeyou Mobility, a Cree-led telecom formed to serve an area mainly populated by Indigenous communities, is building a network of fibre-linked cell towers with the goal of covering a region that previously had none, according to its founders.

"It was a big, empty, dangerous mass," said Dean Proctor, one of Eeyou's co-directors. "There was a crying need for better cell service in the communities and on roads."

Why Canada's roadways are studded with cellphone 'dead zones'

When complete, the central spine of the network will stretch more than 550 kilometres long in Eeyou Istchee and the James Bay region, from the city of Lebel-sur-Quévillon up to the reservation town of Chisasibi and beyond.

Across Canada, roughly 15,000 kilometres – or 13.4 per cent – of major roads and highways have no mobile service, according to a Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission 2023 report, the latest numbers available.

Highways with gaps in cellular coverage twist through all parts of the country, but they are particularly common in Quebec. About one-fifth of the distance on national highways and one-10th of that on other major highways is not connected by LTE cell service, according to the latest numbers provided by the CRTC and Statistics Canada.

This figure also does not include thousands of kilometres of gaps on secondary roads, where they pose a safety risk to inhabitants.

As The Globe and Mail has reported, the cause of Canada's dead-zone problem centres largely around the biggest barrier: cost. The economics of building network infrastructure in sparsely populated areas can be challenging for companies, and are made more difficult by technical considerations and funding delays.

This problem pushed three companies to jointly found Eeyou Mobility in 2019: The James Bay Eeyou Corporation (JBEC), a Cree investment fund; Eeyou Communications Network (ECN), a local not-for-profit fibre internet provider; and SSI Canada, a broadband and mobile operator in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon. Mr. Proctor is also chief development officer for SSI.

The founding companies invested about \$20-million for the network buildout, and raised a further \$80-million from the Quebec government and from Infrastructure Canada.



Mr. Proctor with Nora, the company's warm welcome officer. Eeyou Mobile is expanding connectivity by bringing digital amenities and cellular services to previously underserved areas in the James Bay and Eeyou Istchee regions.

In order to offer mobile and broadband service, Eeyou Mobility secured agreements to sub-licence spectrum – the airwaves used to transmit wireless signals – from Rogers Communications Inc. The company also established cellular roaming partnerships with Rogers, Quebecor Inc.'s Videotron, and American telecom AT&T Inc., to allow those customers to roam on Eeyou networks and vice versa.

In 2021, Eeyou Mobility started building towers in the James Bay and the Eeyou Istchee region, hooking them up to the ECN's 3,000-kilometre-long fibre network.

So far, the company has secured leases for about 100 sites, and has completed towers on about half of those, with new ones coming online “on a steady basis,” Mr. Proctor said. About 80 will be running in March. The remaining construction will include the “Route du Nord,” connecting Oujé-Bougoumou and Nemaska. Once they are all built, approximately half of the sites will be solar-powered.

In addition to these towers, SSi has also developed the Land Life Link, a portable shelter with telecommunications capabilities powered by solar panels and connected to SpaceX's Starlink constellation.

The shelter's pneumatic tower can be raised in the event of an emergency with a bicycle pump, and provides mobile and broadband connectivity for first responders and communities in distress. They can be used to add network capacity where needed. Mr. Proctor says the company hopes to deploy these structures in the region in the future.



Mr. Gull says whatever profits come out of the company's operations will be re-entered into the local Cree economy.

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Today, Eeyou Mobility's network serves a local population of about 50,000 and twice that number of vehicles, many of whom travel through the region to reach mines and hydroelectric dams. Mr. Proctor said the company has a plan to become profitable and is optimistic it can reach that goal.

JBEC president Henry Gull said the network enables the Cree way of life – hunting, trapping, and fishing – as the coverage areas now offer mobile connection in areas that previously had none.

Beyond the cell service, Mr. Gull says the company intends to support the Cree community by providing work and learning opportunities.

This includes hiring local Cree in the company's planned brick-and-mortar stores and as contractors, and launching an internship program for Cree youth, he said.

“I think the company belongs to every First Nations member under the Cree membership. I think it’s important that the people of the North know that this is their company,” Mr. Gull said. “Whatever profits come out of it will be re-entered into the Cree economy, and used for other purposes.”



From left to right: Mr. Gull, Jeff Philipp, founder and CEO of SSi Canada, and Mr. Proctor.

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In recent months, another promising solution has appeared to fill in dead zones: Several companies have launched direct-to-cell satellite service, an emerging technology that does not rely on cellular towers and which is helping to close coverage gaps.

Mr. Proctor said his company has found that, generally, consumers will chose a cell network that relies on terrestrial networks over satellite if one is available, because they tend to be more reliable.

He credits Eeyou Mobility’s success to the combined experience of the three founding groups – the local knowledge, the fibre network and the retail know-

how – and says it’s an example of how small companies are innovating to serve their communities.

“There seems to be this bias towards a large incumbent doing it,” he said. “It’s not that somebody else didn’t do it. We did it first.”

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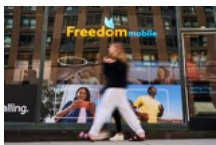
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