BUSINESS

Towering Service

Eeyou Mobile's journey to connecting the Cree Nation

By Patrick Quinn
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Eeyou Mobile is in the final stages of expanding communication coverage to the access roads of every Cree community. It's part of a longstanding mission to connect Eeyou Istchee's many dead zones to cell service, addressing safety concerns and empowering economic growth.

Now with the most extensive mobile network in the region, the Cree-led telecommunications company is completing about 100 new cellular towers along the length of the Billy Diamond Highway and other roads, providing service from Amos to Radisson.

"For the past two years, all the municipalities have been hooked up and we've been working on developing the highway network," explained Eeyou Mobile president Henry Gull. "We've even built towers close to some of the coastal communities so people can have cell service out in the bay."

It's been a rapid development for the company, formed in 2019 with an initial $24 million investment by the James Bay Eeyou Corporation (JBEC), Eeyou Communications Network (ECN) and Yellowknife-based SSi Canada. Gull is also president of the JBEC Cree investment fund.

Leveraging the not-for-profit ECN's territory-wide fibre optic network and SSi's expertise in delivering mobile wireless service across Canada's North, Eeyou Mobile first launched in 2021. It has since established its network in the Cree communities, the rest stop at Km 381 and five Jamesian towns: Chapais, Chibougamau, Lebel-Sur-Quevillon, Matagami and Radisson.

"We're able to get the bands to allow us to install our equipment on their buildings," said Gull. "Sometimes we ask them if we can use one of their towers in the community or we'll install a pole to boost the service."

In 2023, provincial and federal governments announced a $57 million project to implement cellular service across Eeyou Istchee's highways and roads in three phases. Officials said the funding would "bridge the digital divide" and contribute to greater safety for residents and motorists.

The lack of cell service was heavily criticized after Waswanipi resident Caleb Brien was hit and killed by a car along Highway 113 in 2021. The driver was forced to leave the scene to call for help. During the forest fires of 2023, many evacuees were stuck in traffic for hours without service.

In the project's final phase, coverage will expand along the Route du Nord from Chibougamau, as well as a busy forestry road between Matagami and Quevillon, and the road from Billy Diamond Highway to the Eleonore Mine.

"We will have coverage on about 5 km on each side of the highway too," Gull said. "We are using the VoLTE 4G technology, meant for distance. One lady from Waswanipi said she still had service heading to her camp in Lac Madeleine."

Expanding mobile connectivity to remote areas provides a potential life line in the event of emergencies. Gull said that people from the Jamesian towns have appreciated having new service at their cottages.

About half of the new towers will be solar-powered, backed up with diesel generators. Having implemented mobile coverage across Nunavut, SSi has developed innovative tools like the Land Life Link, a portable shelter with off-grid connectivity powered by solar panels (or even a bicycle pump, if necessary) that can support first responders or communities in distress.

"We developed solar panels that can generate enough electricity to keep these towers warm in the winter and cool in the summer," said Gull. "We discovered the technology we used is bifacial so when the sun hits the snow and bounces back up it generates energy on the backside also. We don't need much diesel fuel."

In addition to SSi's network across Nunavut, roaming agreements with Rogers, Videotron and AT&T provide Eeyou Mobile customers with coverage throughout Canada, the United States and even Mexico. As the company pursues further arrangements around the world, Gull emphasized that their reliable service is built for northern realities.

"Prior to being with Eeyou Mobile, I was with Bell Canada and every day when the school would close, we'd have very poor service because I guess all the students were taking over the network," recalled Gull. "Because of the fibre backbone we use, there's no issues."

While Eeyou Mobile currently has fewer than 2,000 customers, Gull said that number is rising steadily as it targets a clientele of over 6,000 to reach profitability. Along with customer service in communities like Whapmagoostui, where the company is the only cell provider, it has recently employed local entrepreneurs to spread the word.

Eeyou Mobile enables people to bring their own phones and pay monthly without contracts, easily reactivating service without losing their phone number. Family plans connect five phones for $99 per month while individual plans start at $25 monthly.

While customers face roaming charges outside Eeyou Istchee, Gull said that people are finding they have ample data for internet use on even the most basic plan. Gull highlighted the company's community support, sponsoring local artists and sports teams.

Eeyou Mobile provides employment and training opportunities for community members and plans to launch an internship program for Cree youth. Gull emphasizes that the company belongs to the Cree, with eventual profits reinvested in the Cree economy.

"We are here for the long haul and will be supporting a lot of different organizations in the community into the future," asserted Gull. "I know it's difficult to change your provider but give us a chance and we'll prove this is the better service for the Cree Nation."

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Cree School Board
Commission scolaire crie

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Goose Break is here!

As families across iiyiyiu aschii head out on the land for Goose Break, we wish everyone a safe and meaningful time with family, culture, and tradition.

This is a special time of the year when many reconnect with the land, share knowledge between generations, and take part in the spring goose hunt — an important part of iiyiyiu life.

Enjoy the time outdoors, travel safely, and make the most of these moments with loved ones.

Travel safely and enjoy your time together.

C'est la saison de la chasse à l'oie!

Les familles de tout iiyiyiu aschii partent en pleine nature pour célébrer la chasse à l'oie, et nous tenons à vous souhaiter de passer un moment agréable et enrichissant en famille, dans le respect de la culture et des traditions.

C'est une période particulière de l'année où plusieurs renouent avec la terre, transmettent leur savoir de génération en génération et participent à la chasse printanière à l'oie — un élément important de la vie iiyiyiu.

Profitez du plein air, voyagez en sécurité et savourez ces moments avec vos proches.

Et surtout, profitez pleinement de ces moments passés ensemble.

Dr. Sarah Pashagumskum
Chairperson

Caroline Mark
Director General