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Sky is Limit for Alberta's High-Flying Aviation, Aerospace Firms

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At a time when Albertans are dwelling on the recession and the vagaries of natural resource prices, it is refreshing to find a good-news story about an industry that is a growing contributor to economic output and diversification. And when it comes to potential, Alberta's aviation and aerospace sector is definitely a first-round draft choice.

From Nov. 5 to 7, representatives from Alberta's over 200 aviation and aerospace firms will gather at Aviation Alberta's annual conference, entitled "Celebrating 100 Years of Flight and Looking Ahead." The group will talk shop, do deals, and receive presentations from industry and government spokespersons; including a keynote address, "Hitler's Stealth Aircraft," from Emmy Award-winning producer Michael Jorgensen.

In addition to celebrating 100 years of flight, the attendees could also celebrate their important contribution to Alberta's economy. The aviation and aerospace industry is comprised of firms that make aircraft and aircraft parts, perform aircraft maintenance, offer aircraft-related services and invent new technologies. The industry generates \$1.3 billion in annual revenue, is home to 5,000 jobs exclusive of the airlines and airports, and exports 40 per cent of its products and services. And this did not happen by accident.

Alberta's aviation and aerospace industry represents the success an emerging sector can achieve when industry, government and academia work together. In this industry the stakes are huge. Canada's aviation and aerospace industry is the fourth largest in the world, generating more than \$22 billion in annual revenue and supporting 82,000 jobs. And Canada, in turn, is just part of an ever-expanding global industry which will soon emerge from the current downturn and continue exponential growth.

The action taken to develop the aviation and aerospace sector in Alberta reads like a recipe for successful diversification. The first, and perhaps most

important step, involved gaining an understanding of the sector and recognizing the cohesive forces an industry association can generate. The Alberta government has been proactive in working with the federal government to support Aviation Alberta, the industry association that organizes and speaks for the sector, and brings industry members together to achieve common objectives. This is especially important in a jurisdiction like Alberta, where the business culture is often based on individualism and the pioneer spirit, as opposed to co-operation and collective action.

Aviation Alberta promotes Alberta's aviation and aerospace capacity domestically and abroad through initiatives that increase the visibility of the sector. For example, at the Leduc conference Aviation Alberta and the Alberta government will unveil a "first of its kind" interactive, electronic map of Alberta's aviation and aerospace sector. Developed by research centres at the University of Alberta's School of Business, the map will be available on the Alberta government's website and provide buyers, suppliers and business developers with an instant picture of Alberta's aviation and aerospace capacity that can be sorted according to industry sub-classifications while also providing contact information for individual firms. The result will be like searching for a hotel in an unfamiliar city using Google Maps as opposed to a phone directory.

The second step involved bringing stakeholders together to identify niches where Alberta offers a competitive advantage and the highest economic potential. The criteria used to identify the niches included: a good reputation for collaborative action; the potential to attract more companies; and opportunities for technology transfer across sectors like nanotechnology, advanced materials and life sciences. The five niches that were identified are: robotics and unmanned vehicle systems; defence electronics; space science and geomatics; aircraft manufacturing, maintenance, repair and overhaul; and logistic support to the military.

The next step involved assessing growth opportunities and barriers to growth, then agreeing on actions that industry, government and academic stakeholders can take to advance each niche. For example, in the category of robotics and unmanned vehicle systems, the stakeholders created the Canadian Centre for Unmanned Vehicle Systems in Medicine Hat. The Centre's services

include developing systems standards, undertaking research, providing training, and offering access to launch facilities, all of which are necessary for the future development of the niche.

The final step, currently underway, is developing longer-term actions to support the growth of each niche and the overall sector. The actions will include providing educational support and training, international marketing, developing infrastructure, and through Aviation Alberta, building opportunities for supplychain development and business networking. It is a work in progress that requires perseverance, but that is exactly what is needed for successful diversification and an economic future less dependent on factors that we do not control.

Re: “Sky is limit for Alberta’s high-flying aviation, aerospace firms,” by Jason Brisbois, Opinion , Nov. 2.

Jason Brisbois does not mention of the woes of Field Aviation in Calgary, or more recently, and of note to Edmonton, the closing of the L3 Spar Aerospace plant this past summer. His failure to mention these two former largest repair and overhaul facilities in the province is beyond negligent.

Brisbois says the Alberta government has been proactive in supporting aviation through the federal government. I wish he was able to supply examples in the case of Field and Spar. Oh, that’s right, he can’t since the Alberta government said and did nothing about this.