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Donkin coal mine project moving forward on smaller scale

By The Canadian Press
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DONKIN — Nearly a decade after the closure of Cape Breton's last underground mine, coal will once again rise to the surface.

Xstrata Coal Donkin Management announced Wednesday it will move ahead with an underground operation in Donkin, but on a smaller scale than earlier expected.

Hundreds of people attended a public meeting at the Donkin fire hall to hear Australia-based mining corporation Xstrata and Erdene Resource Development of Dartmouth announce that the scope of the project has changed.

Instead of mining for thermal coal used to fire large generating plants, the Donkin project will focus on mining coking coal used in many industrial processes.

The coking project includes building a coal washing plant on the site and creating a barge where coal will be loaded onto large ships.

Xstrata Coal chief development officer Jeff Gerard said about 200 onsite jobs will be created for Cape Breton and another 1,000 spinoff jobs. Most of the onsite jobs would be underground.

Gerard said under a new proposal, Xstrata and Erdene expect to produce about 2.75 million tonnes of washed, export-grade coking coal per year. It will likely be sold to markets in Europe, South America, India and China.

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“The resource size of this mine is capable of supporting that size of operation for well over 25 years,” he said. “So it’s a long-term proposition.”

Changes to project come after Nova Scotia Power announced in late 2009 that it would not purchase raw coal produced during the Donkin exploration phase.

The utility has said the unwashed coal contains too much mercury and sulphur to be usable under existing environmental regulations.

Xstrata had planned to sell and truck 350,000 tonnes of raw coal per year to a predominantly domestic market.

Project partners said they have been given environmental approval to begin the project. However, the project requires both provincial and federal approval for changes to infrastructure.

They expect to begin mining Donkin next year.

“I think it’s a pretty good night,” said Alfie MacLeod, the Cape Breton West member of the Nova Scotia legislature.

“There will be some hurdles that we have to meet but we will meet them as a community.”

Donkin will be the first underground mining operation in Cape Breton since the last shift at the Prince colliery in Point Aconi in November 2001.

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