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Table of Contents/ Table des matières

OTHER COVERAGE:

Canada helps kick off International Polar Year.....p.3

March 2, 2007

Canada helps kick off International Polar Year

Canadian researchers are raring to book time on icebreakers, now that cheques are finally in the mail

[Peter Calamai, Toronto Star](#) (page A04)

Scientists face tight rationing of research time aboard Canada's aging icebreakers during the latest and biggest international assault on the mysteries of polar regions.

A special allocation of about \$20 million has been made for icebreaker costs during International Polar Year, which kicked off yesterday and runs until March 2009 to cover field seasons at both poles. That money, federal officials said, is part of \$150 million earmarked for Canada's part in the polar year, which involves 63 nations, \$1.7 billion, and more than 200 research projects in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Roughly \$100 million of Canada's contribution will be spent on 44 Arctic research projects involving hundreds of scientists from several federal departments and 28 universities, including York and the University of Toronto. They will focus on how climate change is affecting polar regions and the health of the Inuit and other Arctic dwellers.

The remaining \$50 million will be spent on emergency preparedness, outreach, communications, upgraded Arctic weather forecasting and logistics - including \$20 million to rent the Coast Guard's five icebreakers.

Almost all of that money will be used to pay for the months that Canada's sole dedicated research icebreaker, the Amundsen, is frozen into the Arctic icepack for long-term studies, said Kathleen Fischer, executive director of the federal polar year program office.

Canadian researchers will have limited access to the Louis St. Laurent, a heavy-duty icebreaker that will survey the Arctic's continental shelf.

The Coast Guard's three other icebreakers aren't robust enough to handle the ice in many parts of the Arctic.

Some Canadian researchers have been looking to Russia because it has a surplus of heavy-duty icebreakers, some nuclear-powered. But they haven't been able to book time on foreign ships because Ottawa has yet to sign the research cheques.

Northern Development Minister Jim Prentice and Environment Minister John Baird formally unveiled the approved projects in a ceremony in the soaring Grand Hall of the Museum of Civilization yesterday, before scores of the country's northern researchers.

They also re-announced the \$150 million funding originally pledged by Liberal deputy prime minister Anne McLellan in September 2005.

Federal officials said they needed the 17 months since then to pick projects that emphasized both scientific excellence and relevance to the needs of northern inhabitants.

Bureaucracy isn't the only thing marking this year as different from the first International Polar Year, in 1882-83, when scientists from the United States, Germany and Britain established Arctic bases to measure magnetism. A missed supply ship that year meant 17 of the 24 Americans involved perished from starvation, with some bodies eaten by the survivors.

"We've made emergency preparedness plans," said Patrick Borbey, a senior Northern Affairs official. "No scientist will starve to death this time."