



Airships ideal for North

Debate over how to best transport cargo to the remote North may be up in the air, but experts argue future aviation technology suited to do the job is grounded in the past.

A Manitoba-based transportation analyst says governments should be supporting investments in airships, rather than continue to spend millions of dollars on temporary ice roads which, due to climate change, are becoming less reliable and short-lived.

“We spend all this money (building temporary roads) and there’s nothing to show for it,” University of Manitoba business professor Barry Prentice said Wednesday.

“It’s time to do something different.”

Prentice, who wrote a paper on remote transportation alternatives for the Northern Ontario Policy Institute, said airships with rigid structures - not traditional helium-filled blimps - have the potential to carry many tonnes of cargo to Indigenous reserves that are accessible only by airplane.

Prototype airships have already been tested in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, he noted.

Prentice envisions a small fleet of airships that could service the remote regions of Northern Ontario and Manitoba.

Though a single, rigid-structure ship could come with a price-tag of \$20 million, Prentice said that would be like only a quarter of the cost of a large regular cargo aircraft.

As well, he noted, the cost of building ice roads, which may only last six weeks, adds up. This upcoming season, the Ontario government earmarked \$5.8 million - \$300,000 more than last year - to build more than 3,100 kilometres of roads across its remote North.

The federal government usually matches the provincial amount. Remote First Nations use the temporary roads to bring in heavy supplies like fuel and housing materials.

Earlier this year, a \$5-million bridge was unveiled that will connect North Caribou Lake to the provincial road network near Pickle Lake. Ice roads may only last a month, and heavy equipment sometimes plunges through.

“Our elders have asked for the bridge for years because they have witnessed the effects of climate change,” North Caribou Chief Dinah Kanate said at the time.

Even if major trunk roads are built into the Ring of Fire mineral belt, as the Ontario government has pledged to do, it likely won’t be possible to connect every remote First Nation, said Prentice, due to the high cost of building across swamps and waterways.

“We know it can cost \$2-\$3 million per kilometre just for a gravel road, he said.

An airship service would best be run by a private operator, Prentice said. But governments could still play a role by helping to fund land bases and other infrastructure.

Though some may recall the ill-fated Hindenburg airship that caught fire during an attempted docking in New Jersey in 1937, resulting in the deaths of 36 people, Prentice said accidents involving airships were in fact rare, even in the 1930s.

“And we’ve learned a lot about the technology since then,” he said.

Prentice’s analysis is part of an overall critique of Ontario’s plan to revamp transportation methods in the remote north. Ideas floated so far, such as drones and hover barges, are inadequate, he says.

More information is available online at northernpolicy.ca/winterroads