



▶ B.C. IN THE BLOOD: Seaspan Shipyards is the shipbuilding industry leader on Canada's West Coast

by Evelyn Brotherston

Located at the base of the North Shore Mountains, the facilities at Seaspan's Vancouver Shipyards include a major steel forming shop, a large fabrication and assembly hall, and a 20,000-square-foot totally enclosed paint facility. Repair services are centered on a Syncrolift marine elevator with a capacity of 1,200 tonnes; the yard also has the capability to drydock multiple vessels simultaneously. An imposing feature is Hiyí Skwáyel (pronounced hee-yay sk-why-el — the Squamish language translation of "Big Blue"), the name given to Seaspan's 300-tonne permanent Gantry crane. Built as part of Seaspan's modernization project, the crane measures 80 metres high and 76 metres wide and is positioned over the shipyard's erection berth. (SEASPAN)

IF YOU'VE EVER spent time on Canada's West Coast, you'll know there are few experiences as iconic as the hour-and-a-half-long ferry crossing between Vancouver and Vancouver Island.



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Spotting a whale may not be guaranteed, but you will see some of the other things that make British Columbia special: everything from tug boats towing giant log barges, to cargo ships carrying millions of dollars in commercial goods to and from Asia. Barges can be seen hauling minerals and other construction materials, while cruise ships make their way to the breathtaking Inside Passage, which will take them north to Alaska.

What you may not know is that there’s one company that has had a hand in helping make all this activity possible: Seaspan. Long before Seaspan gained national attention in 2011 when its Shipyards division was awarded a major role in Canada’s National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS), the company was already a force to be reckoned with in the B.C. economy.

As Seaspan sets about construction on the first Offshore Fisheries Science Vessel (OFSV), under the NSPS non-combat vessel package, we spoke with Tim Page, Vice President - Government Relations – Seaspan Shipyards, about the company’s history and future.

“As a privately owned business, we’ve steadily and consistently gone about our business without a great deal of public fanfare,” says Page, “but Seaspan is really a mainstay of B.C.’s maritime ecosystem.”

The company, whose history stretches back to the 19th century, contributes to just about every sector of the marine transportation industry on Canada’s West Coast, including: running a ferry service which transports over 50 per cent of all the consumable goods sold on Vancouver Island; moving wood chips, aggregates and other resources by tug boat and barge; refitting and repairing cruise ships; and refuelling about 70 per cent of the container and cruise ships that enter the Port of Metro Vancouver. And ... we haven’t even gotten to shipbuilding yet.

When it comes to satisfying the terms of the government’s Defence Procurement Strategy — under which defence contractors must prove their long-term commitment to developing local economies — you could say that Seaspan’s got it covered.



Amid much fanfare on June 24, the Harper government and Seaspan employees celebrated the start of construction of the first Offshore Fisheries Science Vessel (OFSV) at the Vancouver Shipyards. After a \$155-million modernization upgrade, Seaspan’s Block Assembly Shop (above) is now cutting steel on the CCGS Sir John Franklin, the first of three OFSVs (below) at a cost of \$514 million. (HEATH MOFFATT, SEASPAN)

Since beginning work on the NSPS, Page explains, elementary school enrolment on Vancouver’s North Shore — home to Seaspan’s primary shipyard (Vancouver Shipyards) — has gone up for the first time in decades. It’s no coincidence. The company is enjoying an influx of talent on a scale that’s bigger than ever before. In fact, it has set up partnerships with everyone from Vancouver’s major universities to local high schools and community colleges — all in an effort to make sure that local skilled tradesmen and engineers are recruited as efficiently as possible.

Page says he’s particularly proud of Seaspan’s partnership with the local First Nations groups. The company invested \$155-million of its own money into modernizing Vancouver Shipyards in advance of NSPS construction; close to 25 per cent of the contracts for that project were awarded to First Nations businesses.

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“It was a very conscious decision on our part,” says Page. “Our shipyard is located on the territorial lands of two important bands. It was very important for us to demonstrate our long-term commitment to doing business on the North Shore and our commitment to collaborating with First Nations in the process. So, as we were running our competitions, everything else being equal in terms of quality and price, we were absolutely looking to see where there were opportunities to contract with First Nations businesses.”

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In addition, Seaspan has also invested an additional \$15 million to upgrade facilities at Victoria Shipyards, including a new operational centre, to support testing, trials and commissioning of the new federal vessels.

Working with the Royal Canadian Navy won’t be new a new challenge for Seaspan’s men and women in Victoria; the shipyard is located just across the harbour from CFB Esquimalt, home of Canada’s Pacific Fleet. Seaspan is currently participating in programs to modernize the Royal Canadian Navy’s Halifax-class frigates and Victoria-class submarines at its Victoria Shipyard. Under these two projects, Page explains, “We have over a decade of intense, practical working experience with the Royal Canadian Navy, which we think to be extremely successful.”

For the NSPS program, each of the Canadian Coast Guard and RCN vessels being built by Seaspan will see the majority of their construction occur in Vancouver, before each vessel is sailed to Victoria for their final outfitting, testing and trials.

The first of three Offshore Fisheries Science Vessels (OFSVs) that is currently under construction is expected to be completed by early 2017. Design work has also begun on the Canadian

Coast Guard’s Offshore Oceanographic Science Vessel (OOSV), as well as the long-awaited Joint Support Ships (JSS), the first of which is scheduled to be completed by 2020.

“It’s an extremely busy time here at Vancouver Shipyards,” says Page. “We’re like the proverbial duck floating on the pond: it looks like everything is tranquil, but those legs are beating under the water.”

The order of the vessels’ completion has been laid out by the Canadian government and Page estimates the current backlog will take eight to ten years. “Beyond that, we think there will be future work from the federal government,” he says.

Their focus, however, is on increasing productivity and competitiveness so they can continue to grow in the commercial sector as the NSPS work allows.

“We’re very proud of the work that has been triggered by Seaspan’s win of the non-combat package under the NSPS. It has triggered quite a cascading effect within the local economy. And importantly for us, it has done a great deal for the morale and optimism of those who have worked in the shipyard for many decades.”

After investing so much of their own money into modernizing its Vancouver and Victoria Shipyards, it’s safe to say that Seaspan will be keeping ferries, tugs, and barges afloat for many years to come. Who knows ... maybe they’ll even branch out into whale watching. 🍁

A rendering of the Royal Canadian Navy’s Joint Support Ship (JSS), which will be built at Seaspan’s Vancouver Shipyards. According to specifications, the vessels will measure 174 metres in length and have a displacement of 20,400 metric tonnes. (RENDERING COURTESY OF THYSSENKRUPP MARINE SYSTEMS CANADA)