

# Trading places

## New oil opportunities overseas

**MARKUS ERMISCH**  
Sun Media

As Alberta's energy companies are tightening their belts in anticipation of leaner years, some players in the oil and gas service industry are looking outside North America to grow their business.

One region being considered is the Middle East.

"We do see that a lot of our sales efforts are switching overseas right now," said Mark Williamson, co-owner of Enerflow Industries Inc., a Calgary firm servicing the oil and gas industry.

"It's changed quite a bit in the last year. The dynamics have changed here in Alberta."

Drilling activity in Alberta is forecast to continue slowing and several players are increasingly investing in B.C. and Saskatchewan as Alberta is about to introduce a new royalty regime in January.

"If you don't adapt to change, it's quite difficult to source new customers and survive in this type of market," said Williamson, who's just about to head to a petroleum industry exhibition in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, to showcase his company to an international audience.

The Middle East holds much promise for his company, Williamson said, noting, however, a very different business environment, the lan-

guage barrier and trade sanctions against several countries in the region, make it a difficult place in which to do business.

"That's one of our biggest challenges: Trying to distinguish where the end product is going," Williamson said.

An Alberta trade office in the Middle East would make it much easier for Alberta companies to operate in the region.

The province runs 10 international offices around the world for a total annual cost of \$7.2 million. The closest such office to the Middle East is located in Munich, Germany.

Deputy premier Ron Stevens, Alberta's minister of international and intergovernmental relations, said his government is considering a trade office in the UAE.

Alberta exports to the UAE alone, he said, totalled \$153 million in 2007. An additional \$34 million went to Israel.

"The short of it is that we think there is a significant opportunity there," said Stevens.

Just last week, an Emirates Airlines official pleaded with Calgary's business community to support a direct airlink between Calgary and the UAE. Stevens said he's aware of this push.

"I think a lot could be said to have a direct flight to Calgary," he said.