

Workshop follow-up report from:

Cumulative Impacts in the Northern Rockies

A community workshop to learn and share stories about the positive and negative impacts of resource development

Fort Nelson, October 25, 2017

About the Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium

The Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium (CIRC) is a research and community outreach initiative based at the University of Northern British Columbia that is dedicated to enhancing understanding of the cumulative environmental, community and health impacts of resource development. For more information on our ongoing research and related initiatives, please visit www.unbc.ca/cumulative-impacts.

About the CIRC Fort Nelson Workshop

CIRC staff facilitated a free public workshop in Fort Nelson on October 25, 2017. This workshop was organized as part of an ongoing CIRC research project focused on developing new tools and processes to assess and monitor the positive and negative impacts of resource development in northern BC. This project aims to integrate community, environment and health values and perspectives, and account for diverse forms of knowledge and information, to inform the next generation of cumulative impact assessment tools. These conversations are also an important avenue through which CIRC can better understand the ways our ongoing research can best enhance on the ground capacity to respond to issues related to cumulative impacts.

This workshop created space for people living and working in the Northern Rockies Region to share their perspectives and experiences related to past and ongoing resource development. To help inform this conversation, CIRC staff shared a suite of publicly available information related to socioeconomic, health and environmental indicators for the Northern Rockies Region. This “regional profile” integrated a variety of data sources to provide a snapshot of change in the Northern Rockies Region over time. While in no way a complete or comprehensive document, this regional profile was shared with the intention of spurring conversation and reflection in response to the following broad question: How do we make better land-use decisions that account for long-term impacts to environmental, community and health values?

Key Messages

Many of the participants were long-time residents of the Northern Rockies, and expressed their connection with the landscape and with the people who call this region home. While workshop participants described a strong sense of community as a defining feature of Fort Nelson, there was also a sense that community morale has been deeply affected by the most recent economic decline and especially low natural gas prices. We heard that in the context of declining industrial activity, with large numbers of associated job losses, many people are struggling to feel optimistic about the future and are experiencing a sense of powerlessness to influence decisions that significantly impact their lives. For many people who have lost their jobs, there is a sense of humiliation associated with not having the experience necessary to find work in another sector, or having to pursue training opportunities to find

jobs they would not normally consider. For people who are still employed, there is a sense of guilt and an acute awareness of still having a job while many other skilled and experienced people are unable to find work. We heard that there is a lack of job security, even for people who are still working, and that this lack of security is expressed as a pervasive sense of precarity. As was pointed out, these experiences have direct ties to both individual and community health.

Connections were also drawn to the particular ways youth may be impacted by the current lack of jobs in resource-based sectors. When oil and gas and forestry companies were investing heavily in the region, industry had a significant presence in schools. Through career fairs and other forms of engagement, youth were given information about skillsets and trades that would enable them to obtain industry jobs, and the kind of lifestyle these jobs would allow (i.e. high wages, job security). This was not done with any ill intention, participants pointed out, because at the time everybody thought it was true, but participants wondered whether youth in the community felt they had been misinformed?

The economic downturn has had significant impacts for the non-profit sector. When various industries have been active in the region, there has been more corporate support for community amenities and initiatives, including more financial support for non-profits. When activity decreases in the region, proponents are often less invested in financially supporting the community, which makes it difficult to plan for the long-term sustainability of nonprofit organizations. The impacts of fluctuating financial support from industry investments are exacerbated by the increased demand placed on social and support services, such as the food bank, in times of decline. The Community Literacy Society was noted as one example of a local support service that has worked hard to expand their scope to address some of the unmet needs of the community during the downturn (for example, assisting community members who are applying for Employment Insurance). We also heard stories about the ways in which the community has worked to make events and activities free wherever possible. For example, the local pool has free swims and the movie theatre shows free movies 2-3 times per month).

The community has also been affected by significant fluctuations in the housing market, which have occurred in response to economic fluctuations. These impacts manifest in myriad ways. We heard that many people and families want to leave the community to look for work elsewhere, but have been unable to sell their houses. In these situations, one working member of the household may leave the community temporarily to look for work, while the rest of the family stays behind with the house. In other situations, people are having to walk away from their houses altogether. Significant decreases in house values have also been challenging for people that are hoping to retire but are unable to sell their house, which changes their retirement savings plans. Examples of other shifting family and housing dynamics were referenced, including multiple generations moving in together in order to afford housing costs. For people that do have stable employment and who could potentially become homeowners, we heard that due to an overall sense of lack of job security and apprehension around future housing market dynamics, people are hesitant to make large investments in things like houses. We also heard that, amongst the population that rents, people are moving more regularly at the end of the month as monthly rental rates have consistently decreased.

With regards to crime levels, there was a perception amongst participants that between 2007-2012 overall crime levels were high, which placed significant pressure on local law enforcement officers, but that more recently, crime rates have decreased. This was attributed both to the population decrease, as well as the fact that people have less disposable income. Participants wondered whether, if this pattern continues, there will be job losses for local RCMP officers, as the demand may not warrant the same

number of positions. Participants noted there is often a “lag” between economic cycles and how long it takes to match the increased or decreased demands put on a community. For example, when things were really busy in town, there was a lot of pressure on the community to build a new Emergency Services building and a new Community Health building. These projects never came to fruition, but it was pointed out that had the community gone ahead and invested in these new buildings, there would have been significant resources poured into expanding services that are no longer required.

Many connections were drawn between the economic downturn and the physical and mental health of people in the community. We heard that stress grows exponentially in times of decline, and there is the perception that prevalence of physical and mental health issues has increased. There is a sense that the overall morale of the community is low, and that this is manifesting in terms of health outcomes. Connections were made between the mental health impacts of experiencing significant change, while also feeling like you have very little control over those changes.

There are ongoing concerns over the absence and quality of particular health services in the community. We heard most consistently about the lack of maternity services, wait times for air ambulance services, and lack of centralized emergency dispatch response. We also heard about the financial, physical and emotional impacts of having to regularly travel to Fort St. John for healthcare referrals, as many diagnostic and specialist services are not available in Fort Nelson. This trip can be dangerous, time-consuming and costly. Access to particular health services is also a factor for people making retirement plans, who would like to be able to stay in Fort Nelson, but worry about the lack of health services available to service an aging population. There are concerns around the number of people who are referred to Fort St. John for medical reasons but who, for a variety of reasons including things like cost and access to childcare, do not go. There are also concerns around the connection between job losses, and loss of drug plans and extended health care. There was a sense that some people have had to stop filling their prescriptions because, without extended healthcare, they can no longer afford them. With regard to access to family physicians in Fort Nelson, the level of care has remained consistent throughout recent economic fluctuations, such that when the town was busy it was difficult to see your doctor, while now it is quite easy to make an appointment.

There were significant concerns around the impacts of centralization on rural communities, and the subsequent lack of access to services, including healthcare, transportation and education/training opportunities. There is a sense that the community has been impacted by cuts to various provincial ministries, and staffing cuts in regional offices. With staffing cuts, the workload increases for the remaining staff, and there is thus less capacity to adequately serve large geographic areas. Examples were referenced in which the Peace and Liard Regions are combined into single management plans for Northeast BC. This is problematic as these are two large regions with very different threats, impacts, and services. Participants emphasized the necessity of local knowledge and experience in land and resource management, as well as other sectors.

The impacts of centralization have been exacerbated locally as industry investment in the community has diminished. There is a sense that the provincial government has not stepped in to fill the gaps left by industry disinvestment. This trend has impacted the community’s ability to attract and retain residents, especially professionals with young families. While there have been huge job losses in the community, there are also examples of not being able to fill vacant job positions because people are not interested in moving to Fort Nelson. This was attributed in part to the lack of services and amenities available. This

pattern has also been exacerbated by industry disinvestment, as the community is no longer able to offer financial compensation as a recruitment method.

Alongside concerns around the impacts of centralization, participants were adamant that one-size-fits-all policies are often not suited to small, rural and remote communities. Overall, there is a sense that many people, including provincial policy-and decision-makers, are removed from the community and thus do not have an understanding of the context of northern, rural and resource-dependent places. There is a sense that many of the benefits of resource extraction are not felt locally. At the same time there are misunderstandings around resource development, and a lack of understanding and importance placed on northern and rural lifestyles and the ways in which these communities are both impacted by, and connected to, resource development. Workshop attendees described that members of the community are frequently looking for ways to increase awareness of the current circumstances in Fort Nelson, and to advocate for their community. As was pointed out, however, when people from Fort Nelson travel to regional or provincial meetings to advocate for the community, they often have to pay to do it.

Overall, it was noted that the current experience in the Northern Rockies is not one of experiencing the impacts of resource development, but rather, the devolution of development. While it was pointed out that the environment may currently be getting a rest from intensive industrial activity, it was also noted that there are cases where a contaminated site has been left unattended because the proponent is not able to fund site remediation. As we heard, the community has had their mettle tested over a lengthy period of time, and is experiencing the cumulative impacts of a lot of events coming together. In thinking to the future, participants pointed out that natural gas deposits are still in the ground and could be developed in the future. In light of the potential for future development, Fort Nelson First Nation (FNFN) and the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality (NRRM) are taking steps to be more prepared for potential future economic fluctuations. There was a sense that, in the past, both governments have been in a reactive state with regard to community planning and that this has not served them well. Working to be more prepared for potential future development has involved gathering data and information to inform internal planning and decision-making processes. FNFN and NRRM are also engaging in several collaborative projects, including submitting an application for a [Community Forest Agreement](#) and working with Northern Health to develop and implement a [Community Health Plan](#). Participants expressed that it is important to come together throughout these times to develop plans and make decisions that could not be made a few years ago in order to move forward in a way that is positive for the community.

In moving forward, we heard of the importance of ensuring community members and community representatives are involved in all decision-making processes that they will ultimately be impacted by, including land and resource decision-making processes. These processes must include meaningful avenues for participation whereby community feedback and perspectives can influence outcomes. As was pointed out by participants, both NRRM and FNFN are significantly invested in the outcomes of the decisions being made, and carry significant local knowledge to contribute to these processes and thus produce better overall results. With regards to future resource development opportunities, the local government, local First Nations, and community members need to be involved in order to find ways for resource development to actually work for the community. Participants felt that local decision-making bodies have important contributions to make to these processes and that, given the opportunity, there is the potential to work towards solutions that benefit everyone. In moving forward in this process,

equitable access to services, information and input into decisions that affect people in the community and the places where they live, must be made a priority.

Generating Next Steps for Positive Action

In the coming weeks, CIRC staff will continue to process, reflect on, and build this information into our ongoing research directed towards better understanding the cumulative impacts of resource development. In commenting on why people were interested in attending the workshop, participants remarked on the importance of continuing to come out and tell their stories at events organized by researchers in order to ensure that research outcomes adequately reflect community members' lived realities, and are ultimately useful for the community. We hope this report, and future project outcomes, fulfill this responsibility.

These insights will feed into longer term research projects, including the development of publicly available tools and resources. Importantly, both the research process and outcomes are intended to build capacity amongst local communities to respond to cumulative impacts issues, and inform ongoing planning processes around land and resource management. Based on information, ideas, and relationships generated through these workshops, we will work to develop new research projects to respond to issues raised. Throughout this process, we commit to continuing to solicit and respond to feedback through a variety of methods (phone, email, face to face conversations), distribute information widely, act as a hub to enable various individuals and groups to connect with one another, and continue to travel to communities to convene public conversations about these complex issues. CIRC staff present at the Fort Nelson workshop—Madeline Wilson and Marieka Sax—were incredibly humbled and grateful for the willingness of people in the room to share these stories with us, and commit to returning to continue these dialogues.

Acknowledgements

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