

Workshop follow-up report from:

**The past, present and future of natural resource communities
in the Peace River Region**

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

Chetwynd BC, June 19, 2017

About the Cumulative Impacts Research Consortium

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

About the CIRC Chetwynd Workshop

CIRC facilitated a series of free public workshops throughout the Peace River Region between June 19-23, 2017 as part of a project focused on developing new tools and processes to assess and monitor the positive and negative impacts of resource development across northern BC. This project aims to integrate knowledge and information on community, environment and health impacts. 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 in which our ongoing research can best enhance on the ground capacity to respond to issues related to cumulative impacts.

These workshops created space for people living and working in the Peace River 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 around socioeconomic, health and environmental indicators for the Peace River Region. This “regional profile” integrated a variety of data sources to provide a snapshot of change in the Peace River 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

From our discussions, it was clear that people living in Chetwynd value the unique opportunities to spend time on the land, and the amazing landscape in which they get to live, work and play. In sharing stories about their connection to Chetwynd, several people described coming to Chetwynd for work and staying because of the amazing landscape, along with the opportunity to be part of a well-connected community of neighbours. In this regard, we heard that resource development both positively and negatively impacts sense of place and connection to community. Job opportunities attract people to the community and can help in building community connections; however, this sense of community can be

disrupted if people have to leave Chetwynd due to job loss, or even loss of property due to project expansion, which has occurred through repeated patterns of boom and bust in the forestry, mining and natural gas industries. Over the years, we heard that the persistence of locally-owned businesses in downtown Chetwynd and the utilization of local goods and services has been impacted by fluctuating resource economies, a transient workforce, the growing prevalence of online shopping, and the availability of high-wage jobs in the resource sector. We also heard that people are more willing and able to travel longer distances to other larger centres to buy groceries and other necessities, making it difficult for small businesses to remain competitive with larger regional centres. Workshop participants suggested a number of potential growth areas for economic development, including:

- Environmental restoration and regional specialization through native plant cultivation;
- Value-added or alternative agricultural practices; and
- Potential to cultivate a regional tourist identity that encourages tourists to spend longer amounts of time travelling in the region.

As mentioned above, multiple resource industries operate in the region around Chetwynd, including agriculture, forestry, mining, oil and gas, and wind power. This diversity of industries can be beneficial, as it helps the community weather economic downturns associated with any one resource economy. However, participants raised concerns around the environmental and health impacts of multiple industries operating on the same land base, and in close proximity to the Chetwynd town site. In particular, we heard there are community perceptions of high rates of cancer and respiratory illness in the community, and a lack of publicly-available information to better understand whether these perceptions are accurate. We also heard about changes in First Nations land use for harvesting, including former hunting areas being regarded as “no-go zones” due to fears around animals being exposed to environmental contaminants. We also heard concerns around water quality and the amount of habitat available for wildlife populations from Indigenous perspectives. This raised questions about how cumulative impacts are grounded in past and ongoing impacts of colonization.

Workshop participants shared concerns around a variety of changes people have been noticing in the environment. Without access to helpful or up-to-date information that documents these changes, we heard that it is hard for people to understand and assess these changes. Some of these concerns and issues included:

- Changes in local wildlife populations and forest tree species composition.
- Observed hydrological changes; participants raised questions around whether these changes are the result of forestry activities, and whether these changes are influencing the severity and regularity of spring flooding in the area.
- Lack of baseline data, making it difficult to understand changes to environmental values, assess impacts and establish ecosystem targets for conservation and restoration.

A large portion of the workshop was dedicated towards discussing paths to making better land-use decisions that account for long-term impacts to environmental, community and health values. Some suggestions and considerations to improve future land and resource management processes included:

- Establish more careful planning processes that engage communities, consider available options and resources to direct towards mitigation and restoration activities, and, importantly, follow through on implementing plans.
- Revisit past Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs) for the region. While there were significant challenges associated with this process, we heard that it is important to leverage the time, resources and expertise many people contributed to these processes.

- Envision a new model of planning that explicitly recognizes environmental values at its core, and considers the intrinsic interconnections between the land, the economies, human health and communities.
- Embed education as a foundational element in land and resource management, and make explicit efforts to incorporate youth perspectives into these processes.

Overall, there was a recognition that there is a need for open and ongoing conversations that respect a diversity of perspectives in order to address cumulative impacts. However, we also heard that there are significant capacity gaps that make participating in these processes and implementing outcomes challenging. This includes the temporal dimension of impacts, whereby changes may be difficult to notice without living memory of past conditions. This reinforces the importance of incorporating lived experiences into cumulative impacts assessment and monitoring processes, and valuing the wisdom of people and communities that have lived in this region for a very long time.

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. Insights gleaned from these workshops continue to feed into longer term research projects, including the development of publicly available tools and resources, all of which are intended to build capacity amongst local communities to respond to cumulative impacts issues, and inform future land and resource management. 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 open public conversations about these complex issues in place. CIRC staff present at these workshops—Chris Buse, Madeline Wilson and Ryan O’Toole—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

This event would not have been possible without the generous support of our funders; CIRC would like to recognize and thank the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions and the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia for contributing funds to support this event.



For more information about this event and the CIRC, please contact:

Madeline Wilson, CIRC Research Associate
madeline.wilson@unbc.ca; 1.250.960.5994

Chris Buse, CIRC Project Lead
chris.buse@unbc.ca; 1.250.960. 5778

www.unbc.ca/cumulative-impacts
www.cumulativeimpactslivinglibrary.ca