

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

Fort St. John, June 21, 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 that is dedicated to enhancing the 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 St. John Workshop

CIRC staff facilitated a series of free public workshops throughout the Peace River Region between June 19-23, 2017. These workshops were convened in relation to 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 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

Workshop participants were interested to learn more about cumulative impacts, including perspectives shared by other community members. There was also interest in learning about what work is currently being done in relation to cumulative impacts, and how these various projects and processes relate to one another. In this regard, we heard that there is a need for more clarity around who is doing what in cumulative impacts research and practice, and what the expected outcomes of various processes might be. Where projects and studies are being led by academic institutions, there is a need to ensure all research outcomes get outside of academia. In this regard, CIRC has built an online, freely accessible

database to assist with connecting organizations and information related to cumulative impacts, <http://cumulativeimpactslivinglibrary.ca/>. We encourage all participants to visit this site, add applicable resources, and share the database across your networks.

We asked workshop participants to describe a time in their lives when the connections between environment, community, health and resource development were most evident. We heard that the flooding of the Williston Reservoir in 1968 changed the cultural and ecological landscape of the region in significant and permanent ways, with immeasurable impacts for First Nations communities in the area. While noting the significant impacts of this project, many people in the region were also employed during dam construction, indicating the importance of job creation for community wellbeing. People gave other examples of times when resource development proceeded rapidly, ultimately limiting the potential productivity of the resource, such as the Ladyfern natural gas deposit. We heard concern that, in times of rapid resource development, there is not always the opportunity or delegated responsibility to say, “slow down, let’s do this in a responsible manner,” and in ways that promote the health of environments, people and communities. The legacy of past developments in which poor practices were employed have left an array of contaminated sites that the province will ultimately be responsible for remediating. However, we also heard that industry practices have vastly improved. Safety statistics in the oil and gas industry have continued to improve, and people in attendance recognized that the presence of industry in the region has contributed to a higher quality of life in and around Fort St. John. Several people pointed out that industry has been responsive to community concerns, and allowed for the development of community resources and infrastructure. More recently, there has been interest in innovative restoration processes for formerly industrialized sites, even where those technique may be slow and more costly.

Concerns were also shared around a wide variety of community and health impacts. For people employed within the resource sector, the hours can be long and the pace of work intense, impacting overall health and wellbeing for both workers and their families. Moreover, these jobs can be competitive, contributing to a sense that someone else may be waiting in line for your job if you can’t maintain a particular pace. There continues to be a significant number of fly-in fly-out workers in Fort St. John. While in some ways this was seen as a more sustainable way for industry to operate in the region in order to lessen community impacts, it also means that money earned in the region is largely spent elsewhere, while still adding additional strain on health and social services. As various resource-based industries ebb and flow—particularly oil and gas—the community of Fort St. John also changes. Because of the high wages available in industry jobs, it can be difficult for health and social service agencies and the hospitality industry to attract and maintain staff. These human resource issues are compounded by the fact that demand for services within each of these sectors grows with increased industrial activity. For government-funded agencies, including the school district, funding has not increased to match shifting community needs such as increasing classroom sizes. In Fort St. John, there have also been significant fluctuations in both housing availability and affordability in response to shifting levels of oil and gas activity in the region.

To better weather these cycles of population growth and decline, we heard that attracting and retaining full-time residents to Fort St. John is a priority. In order to continue to build the kind of community that people are committed to staying in even when there are fewer resource-based jobs available, we heard that it is important to ensure there are ways for newcomers to integrate and get connected to the city. During periods of increased activity, the resources that industry brings to a community should be

carefully invested to spark and encourage long-term community development through things like trail-building, building sidewalks, investing in civic beautification, and creating other amenities that help to create a sense of place in Fort St. John. While the growth and decline of other resource industries has been significant, agriculture was described as the region's most consistent mainstay. According to workshop participants, the important role that agriculture continues to play as a consistent in the regional economy is not always recognized by the community.

In thinking about the future of the region, there was a strong recognition that a more integrated approach to land use planning across sectors and industries is necessary, especially with the prospect of increased natural gas activity in the Peace. According to participants, oil and gas and mining are often the focus of conversations around cumulative impacts, while the impacts of other resource-based industries, such as forestry and agriculture, receive less emphasis. In regards to the overall footprint of having multiple resource industries operating on the same land base, questions were raised around whether various industrial operators could work together to share resource roads, power lines and other kinds of infrastructure that, when constructed independently by each operator, rapidly proliferate the number of right of ways across the landscape. There was a strong sense that the provincial government should take the lead in planning for and addressing the cumulative impacts of multiple industries, and that currently various resource industries are regulated within ministerial silos.

This lack of integrated planning and oversight by any single regulatory body was exemplified in considering the impacts of resource camps. Currently, there is no single government authority responsible for permitting and monitoring resource camps (including keeping track of the number of workers staying in camps at any given time), posing multiple health and safety concerns for workers and making it difficult for municipalities to plan for the population influx. While not without their challenges, we heard that now is the time to have collaborative and ongoing conversations around integrated land use planning. These conversations must necessarily involve industry players, and require participation and support from provincial decision-making authorities. The importance of beginning to have these conversations together on an ongoing basis is underscored by a desire to ensure the next generation can enjoy a similar quality of life, including getting to access and experience wilderness areas. We heard that the Peace Region is a unique place in many respects, including the kinds of issues people are experiencing around resource development and cumulative impacts. However, we also heard that this region is full of innovation and expertise to address these challenges, and that people are ready to take this challenge on.

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. Workshop participants can expect a more fulsome report in the next few weeks. As well, 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 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

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