

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

**Tumbler Ridge BC, June 23, 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](http://www.unbc.ca/cumulative-impacts).

**About the CIRC Tumbler Ridge Workshop**

CIRC 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. 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.

One of the goals of these workshops was to create 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 initiate this process, 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 passionate about Tumbler Ridge, and very interested in cultivating and participating in conversations about the future of their community. Situated within an amazing landscape, we heard that residents value local recreational opportunities and wilderness areas; these kinds of assets have kept many people in the area throughout periods of significant community change. Residents of Tumbler Ridge have experienced both rapid economic growth and decline, and the ways in which such changes impact every aspect of a community. This led participants to emphasize the

importance of ensuring resource development in the area brings sustainable and long-term benefits to the community through thoughtful and participatory decision making processes.

Workshop participants shared that the history of Tumbler Ridge—which was formally established to service the Quintette coal mine and has subsequently seen several other coal mines open and close in the area—has seen significant changes in response to cycles of resource development. The international coal market, combined with the small size of the community, have led to profound impacts on public sector operations in Tumbler Ridge. Community services in the area were reported to be underfunded, and many families have to travel to Dawson Creek to access things like respite care, or support for children with learning disabilities. Even during economic booms, health services were challenged to meet the increased demand for services, and there was a reluctance to invest resources into the community because of the short-term nature of industry commitments. As we heard, a lack of public sector investments with long-term prosperity in mind make it difficult to create the kind of community in which people can thrive. In terms of private investment, there has also been hesitation to invest in the form of small businesses or retailers in Tumbler Ridge due to the perception of a risky or volatile investment climate, which further limits the number of non-industry jobs available in the community.

Throughout the economic cycles of the local coal industry, house values, rental prices and vacancy rates have gone through rapid fluctuations. The boom was characterized by low vacancy rates and relatively high rental costs. Since the downturn in the coal industry, housing prices have decreased significantly leading to widespread challenges for selling local properties. Rental rates in Tumbler Ridge are now lower than many other communities in the Peace. In response to the relative housing affordability, there has been an increase in young families and people on fixed incomes moving to Tumbler Ridge, which has increased pressure on social service providers.

In thinking about the environmental impacts of coal mining, participants pointed out that open-pit mines have a fairly large and visible environmental footprint. Cumulatively, the existence of multiple mines in the region has impacted caribou populations, which is currently a major focus of government programs in the region. Due to the cumulative impacts of past mines operating in the area, current and future developments may be required to undertake a more stringent regulatory process, especially in the context of habitat protections for caribou.

In terms of potential opportunities for economic development and diversification, there are many exciting and innovative ideas being generated by Tumbler Ridge residents. However, people were frustrated by a variety of financial and jurisdictional barriers. Tourism development in the area, especially with the opening of the Tumbler Ridge Global Geopark, was viewed as a very successful endeavour, with tourist numbers increasing each year. We also heard that opportunities to pursue things like the development of rental cabins, a passenger train service to adjacent municipalities, or unique educational/training opportunities are promising. Participants also felt that there may be room to increase the direct presence of the forestry industry in the area, and to ensure that the Tumbler Ridge Community Forest is directly benefitting the community.

In discussing the future of Tumbler Ridge, both in relation to resource development and more broadly, we heard that there is a need for more fulsome planning and decision-making processes that consider who benefits from resource development in the area and who is impacted by these developments. These processes should consider the community impacts of resource development, and also consider

whether the development of any particular resource is desirable or necessary. Once a decision is made, there is a need for more comprehensive monitoring that adequately captures things like population changes, and adequate resources should be allocated to accommodate these changes. In considering the long-term livelihoods of small, resource-dependent northern communities, people outside of the community need to realize that people live in these places; it's where their lives are, and this should be included in any conversations around resource development and long term community survival.

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

**Madeline Wilson**, CIRC Research Associate  
[madeline.wilson@unbc.ca](mailto:madeline.wilson@unbc.ca); 1.250.960.5994

**Chris Buse**, CIRC Project Lead  
[chris.buse@unbc.ca](mailto:chris.buse@unbc.ca); 1.250.960. 5778

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