

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

**Dawson Creek, June 22, 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 Dawson Creek 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**

In describing what motivated participants to attend the Dawson Creek workshop, several people expressed concern around the environmental and health impacts of multiple industries operating on the same land base, and in close proximity to residential properties. Participants shared perceptions of high rates of cancer in the region, unusual symptoms of illness in pets and livestock, as well as concerns over air quality. There is growing unease that people of the community are losing control of their landscape and the future of it is threatened by ongoing resource development activities. People were also drawn

to the workshop to discuss the positive impacts of resource development including how the core infrastructure and services of a town are supported by the economic growth of industry.

Participants recognize the economic benefits they have gained through past resource development. These operations have benefitted the community in many ways including increased employment income, promoting desirable lifestyles, and providing increased revenues to improve health care and education. 'Fair Share' (i.e. the Peace River Agreement) was highlighted as a positive step towards ensuring communities in the Peace receive financial benefit that equals their contribution to the provincial economy. Some participants also recognized that industry was able to provide local schools with scholarships to support students. However, there is a sense that adverse effects have been accelerating, compounded by the recent development of natural gas. In this regard, we heard that resource development both positively and negatively impacts our connection to community and there is a balance to be struck between building a community and maintaining the livelihood of the community.

There is sentiment that industry's willingness to address community issues is not reflective of the community's support for industrial development. Examples of frustration with industry including requests or suggestions put forth by community members falling on deaf ears, concealment of future development plans, inappropriate solutions being offered for urgent problems and a sense that personal concerns or direct experience do not qualify as proof that there is an immediate issue to be addressed, surfaced throughout our discussions. Participants shared that there is uncertainty and confusion regarding which regulatory body or provincial authority is responsible for both the address of immediate and longer term concerns. We also heard from participants who worked in industry, who expressed recognition of the cumulative impacts occurring in the region and the positive role that project proponents can play in addressing community concerns through avenues such as public engagement workshops where diverse perspectives are represented. The attendance of participants at this workshop reflected grassroots interests to reclaim the livelihood of their community and determine a clearer understanding of where the responsibility of their land-use decision making lies.

From our discussions, it was clear that people living in Dawson Creek value the extensive connections they have to the northern BC environment. Multiple resource industries operate in the region around Dawson Creek including agriculture, oil and gas, and forestry. However, the fragility of industry was also recognized. For example, the presence of BSE (mad cow disease) in the region and its impact to cattle was raised as a determinant that led to the sale of farmland for oil and gas exploration. Parallels to similar resource communities were made when communicating an understanding of how quickly industry, or the lack thereof, can affect a population. Though most of our discussions pertaining to resource development around the region have been understood within a greater area, it is clear that impacts of resource development are encroaching upon peoples' properties in Dawson Creek, with examples of well pads being situated less than a kilometre from places of residence. Natural gas development has also had more physical impacts to daily life in Dawson Creek ranging from vibrations caused to residential properties, loud and unsettling noises experienced within homes, increased light pollution at night, and increases in heavy truck traffic. Participants voiced that this has led to intermittent exposure to noxious fumes (i.e. sour gas releases), inexplicable symptoms of fur loss experienced by pets and lethal consequences to livestock. Avenues to voice or learn of community concerns related to industry development seem limited among participants and they indicated apprehension towards community engagement/information events and a lack of confidence in

responsiveness from institutions. Government and industry alike were criticized for a lack of transparent communication regarding devastating experiences occurring to neighbours and community members.

We heard that Dawson Creek is also experiencing a rural decline with schools closing down and concerns that younger generations are less likely to invest their futures in agricultural industries. Younger people face more perplexity and financial challenges when attempting to secure rural land which further contributes to a decrease in rural population and lower school attendance. Real estate values have also been affected by increased oil and gas activity in Dawson Creek. Participants indicated that there has been a shift towards increased private land ownership which provides a clearer process for industry to access land for resource development and is perceived to be less onerous for industry as is determining access to Crown land for development purposes. This has led to a proliferation of development on private land to the point where adjacent properties have become undesirable to potential buyers and the designation of some private land to 'Emergency Planning Zones' (areas of increased safety risk due to distance from active oil and gas projects) has rendered properties located within these zones, unmarketable.

Overall, workshop participants felt that the Dawson Creek community has participated in extensive research from various institutions on issues related to resource development by which they are directly affected. While there has been an eagerness to contribute to research by local community members, reports and outcomes have not matched the need to address the immediate and growing concerns of the residents of Dawson Creek. There is a sense of urgency to make collective decisions in the short-term to ensure the viability of a long-term future. The Muskwa-Kechika Management Area was referenced in conversations as a valuable model to learn from when considering how we can make better land-use decisions that account for the long-term impacts to environment, community and health values. These conversations affirmed CIRC's commitment to convening ongoing conversations surrounding cumulative impacts in Dawson Creek, and the importance of providing a venue for the community to connect and share stories. There are diverse understandings of what cumulative impacts mean to people and having a space to share these perspectives has helped people understand how they can work together to address their immediate concerns. 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. 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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