

Northern Regional Energy Dialogues is an Accelerating Community Energy Transformation (ACET) project led by Sinead Earley, Tamara Krawchenko and Kara Shaw in partnership between the University of Victoria and University of Northern British Columbia and with support from the Community Energy Association and Northern British Columbia Climate Action Network (NorthCAN).

We are working with diverse communities and First Nations across Northern British Columbia to help them identify their interests, needs and opportunities in support of renewable energy transitions. The current phase of the project is focused on convening community based and regional energy dialogues. Future phases will support targeted and community-identified capacity building initiatives and help formalise them with enduring peer networks.

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## Report Back: NorthCAN Forum 2025

*This document shares a summary of the Northern Regional Energy Dialogues engagement at the 2025 NorthCAN Forum, held in Prince George April 29-30<sup>th</sup> 2025. This two-day event brought together over 100 participants-including local government officials, Indigenous leaders, researchers, health professionals, business representatives, and non-profit advocates representing 21 communities and 59 organizations. The forum provided a valuable opportunity for northerners to share their perspectives and directly influence the next steps in research.*



NorthCAN Forum 2025 group photo, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025. Photo Credit: Jayson Hengerhoff, Focal Point Studios

### Introduction

The Northern Regional Energy Dialogues (NRED) project is designed to amplify northern voices in the transition to clean energy, build community resilience, and support the development of sustainable, community-driven energy systems across northern British Columbia. The project recognizes that northern communities are not only on the front lines of climate impacts, such as changing precipitation patterns, rising temperatures, and increased wildfire risk, but are also positioned close to resource sectors undergoing significant transformation. By centering local knowledge and leadership, NRED aims to foster long-term economic stability and enhance the adaptive capacity of the region.

A key milestone for the NRED project was its engagement at the 2025 NorthCAN Forum. The NRED session, held on Day 2 of the Forum, was designed to maximize

participant engagement and knowledge exchange, reflecting the project’s commitment to collaborative, community-based research.

The session began with an overview of the NRED project, introducing participants to its goals, research design, and initial findings. This set the stage for a dynamic “Open Space” segment, where attendees shared their immediate reactions and identified key issues to inform and supplement the project’s core research directions. The heart of the session was the “Scripting Pathways for Progress” activity, where participants worked in groups to imagine, discuss, and report on both worst- and best-case scenarios for the future of regional energy systems. This interactive exercise encouraged critical thinking and creative problem-solving, allowing participants to articulate their hopes and concerns for the energy transition, and to explore how to advance towards their desired futures. Table 1 shares a summary of these discussions.



Forum participants writing the scripts for the future of regional energy systems during the “Scripting Pathways for Progress”

Exercise, April 30th, 2025. Photo Credit: Rob van Adrichem, Community Energy Association.

After a networking break, the session shifted to “Northern Project Tables,” where practitioners and NorthCAN members hosted themed tables highlighting local projects, success stories, and ongoing challenges. This format enabled deeper connections among participants, facilitated peer-to-peer learning, and showcased the diversity of climate action and energy innovation underway in northern BC

By structuring the session around interactive, participant-driven activities, the NRED team sought to prioritize the voices and experiences of northern communities. This approach not only enriches the research process but also strengthens the regional network of practitioners committed to advancing climate action and community resiliency in northern BC. Through its collaborative methodology and deep community engagement, the Northern Regional Energy Dialogues project is laying the groundwork for a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable energy future in the North.

We thank all participants for sharing their rich expertise with us, which is helping us to design the next phase of our work together with communities. The ‘best-case’ scenarios (Table 1) present a sense of what people want to see in their communities. The work now in front of the NRED team is to focus the research questions and pursue the research that will support communities as they move toward those futures. The NorthCAN Forum was an important point in project development – the NRED team is now tasked with developing the proposal for the next four years of research, with these community-identified priorities as a starting point.

**Table 1 Summary of the “Scripting Pathways for Progress” Activity**

| Key Issue   | Worst-Case Scenario   | Best-Case Scenario  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Forestry-Energy Nexus</b>                      | Catastrophic wildfires overwhelm communities and infrastructure due to failing wildfire mitigation efforts, exacerbated by extreme weather. Glacier loss reduces hydropower generation, while unmanaged forests contribute to climate feedback loops and the loss of existing biomass energy systems. Worsening health impacts from smoke and carbon emissions. | Every rural community operates combined heat/power systems using locally sourced biomass, integrating Indigenous cultural burning practices to enhance forest resilience and reduce catastrophic wildfire risks. This supports sustainable silviculture, creates jobs, and enables regional energy grids resilient to climate shocks through diversified renewable integration (e.g. wind and solar). Energy innovation generates revenue, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, and improves human and forest health. Achieving this requires revised energy pricing policies, First Nations partnerships, collaboration across regions, and decentralized forest management. |
| <b>Policy</b>                                     | Restrictive policies block climate mitigation and adaptation, forcing reliance on fossil fuels and preventing local energy independence. Fossil fuel subsidies persist, stifling renewable investments, while healthcare and planning frameworks neglect integrated health impact assessments, leaving communities vulnerable.                                  | Regulatory frameworks prioritize clean energy transitions, eliminating fossil fuel subsidies while mandating health impact assessments for all projects. Policies enable municipal energy sovereignty, affordable housing, local economic development, and progressive enforcement of climate targets through provincial-municipal collaboration.   |
| <b>Skills and Training</b>                        | Skilled labour migrates south as training programs decline, and incentives fail to align with evolving policy or technological demands. Northern regions face a talent drain due to unaffordable housing and rigid, culturally misaligned education systems.  | Northern regions retain talent through affordable housing incentives and culturally adaptive training programs blending online/on-site learning. Mentorship pipelines in trades address labour gaps, supported by provincial funding for continuous upskilling aligned with renewable technology advancements.  |
| <b>Enhancing Meaningful Dialogue in Community</b> | Communities fracture into silos plagued by misinformation and distrust, with no mechanisms for inclusive participation. Burnout and competing priorities stifle progress, while decision-makers ignore grassroots input, deepening alienation.  | Communities maintain permanent forums for cross-sector collaboration, using inclusive language and low-barrier participation tools. Shared metrics track progress on energy projects, while digital platforms connect rural/urban stakeholders to coordinate resource sharing and celebrate quick wins.   |



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| <b>Energy Sovereignty, Security, and Independence</b> | Prolonged blackouts occur as extreme weather cripples centralized grids, and hydro shortages disrupt energy systems. Corporate energy providers abandon regions, leaving communities without affordable alternatives.                    | Resilient INCR (Individual-Neighbourhood-Community-Regional) systems dominate, with solar and wind microgrids, geothermal networks, and EV battery storage ensuring uninterrupted power during climate disasters. Policies mandate equitable access to renewable technology, eliminating energy poverty through targeted subsidies and virtual metering innovations.  |
| <b>Financing Renewable Energy Projects</b>            | Projects stall due to inaccessible grants, complex funding stacking, and weak carbon credit markets. Blended finance models remain underutilized, and policy barriers deter community co-operatives or bond initiatives.                 | Finance models combining stackable grants, investor capital, and community bonds fund projects, supported by streamlined carbon markets, easier access to funding, power purchase agreements, and risk-sharing mechanisms. Municipal renewable levies and co-operative ownership structures democratize energy profits while attracting private investment.   |
| <b>Peer-to-Peer Regional Collaboration</b>            | Isolation intensifies as regions lack networks, excluding rural and unincorporated areas from resource-sharing. Without coordinated forums or subregional working groups, capacity gaps slow disaster response and innovation.           | The NorthCAN network connects all northern communities, including unincorporated areas, introducing new subregional and topical working groups that activate projects (e.g. joint RFPs). Network dashboard tracks and reports needs, capacities, and success stories.   |
| <b>Scaling Up and Accelerating Investments</b>        | Monopolistic utilities block decentralized energy solutions, while outdated land-use policies hinder regional planning. Inequitable ownership models concentrate benefits in corporate hands, stifling community-driven diversification. | Decentralized energy systems dominate through multi-community partnerships and ownership models. Projects support energy diversification and generate community benefits, jobs, and economic development. Land-use policies, funding programs, and policy frameworks encourage energy innovation, prioritizing regional renewable hubs. Provincial loan guarantees derisk small-scale projects, while utilities transition to grid-balancing roles rather than centralized generation monopolies. |