

Northern Regional Energy Dialogues is an Accelerating Community Energy Transformation (ACET) project led by Sinead Earley, Tamara Kravchenko and Kara Shaw in partnership with the University of Victoria, University of Northern British Columbia, and through 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 formalize them with enduring peer networks.

Summary drafted by: Kara Shaw, School of Environmental Studies, University of Victoria

shawk@uvic.ca



Northwest Regional Workshop Summary Report

March 10th, 2025

This is a summary of the Northwest Regional Energy Workshop held at Waap Galts'ap Community House in Terrace, Ts'msyen territory, March 10, 2025. The engagement involved sixteen community and organization representatives from across the region. This included participation from various sectors: elected officials and local government staff, union representatives, HVAC contractors, First Nations, community organizations, and interested citizens, and various communities: Telegraph Creek, Haida Gwaii, Upper Skeena, Prince Rupert, Smithers, Kitimat, and Terrace. The workshop was facilitated by NRED researchers Sinead Earley, Kara Shaw, and Sarah Korn.

The intent of the workshop was to assess key themes and priorities identified through a set of Community Energy Dialogues held in the region in early 2025, alongside other community documents (i.e., energy plans), and refine them in ways that will increase opportunities for regional collaboration. In the morning session, representatives from each community shared their energy stories. This revealed opportunities for collaboration that were discussed during the afternoon, where priority areas and possible next steps for coordination across the region were identified.



Researchers NRED project, including UNBC Faculty of Environment Assistant Professor Dr. Sinead Earley (seated second from right, front row), gathered with community members in Terrace, B.C. on March 10, 2025. (Photo credit: Aaron Whitfield, Red Bike Media)

Shared Themes from Communities: The Morning Session

1. Conversations about energy futures are being driven by concerns about the reliability, sustainability, and environmental impacts of current energy sources.

Many communities are either not served by the existing grid or are “end of the line” communities that are vulnerable to energy outages and aging infrastructure. This is leading to a desire for greater community energy resilience and independence, so that communities can better weather emerging climate impacts. Many

Desire for greater community energy resilience and independence

communities recognize the benefits of integrated energy systems but are seeking more agency in how those systems are designed. Others are isolated, not connected to the energy grid, and want to move past diesel-dependency. The cost and environmental impacts of

current energy sources (e.g. air quality from burning wood; climate change from burning natural gas), as well as a desire to lighten impacts on the ecosystems that support them are also driving these conversations.

2. Communities share many questions about what energy options are possible and desirable.

There is interest in a wide range of potential energy sources and technologies (solar, geothermal, waste-to-energy, energy storage, run-of-river, retrofits and energy efficiency, nuclear [SMR], hydrogen, etc.). There is also desire to explore how novel energy systems can support regional economic development and sustainability planning. Some communities wish to explore innovative opportunities such as advancing circular economy initiatives and better utilization of waste heat from industrial activities. Better infrastructure for active transportation and better options for public transportation between communities are also priorities. However, there is a lack of access to good quality information about emerging energy technologies that is specifically relevant to the context of northern BC. There is also no process through which to engage communities in meaningful conversations or to learn from each other about energy opportunities. For example, some communities that took a leadership role in installing heat pumps encountered a range of problematic industry practices. They are eager to share their learnings so that other communities don't encounter similar challenges.

3. Capacity challenges are key barriers towards cleaner energy solutions.

Communities are struggling with a lack of knowledge (energy literacy) and trusted sources of information about energy options and technologies, which is both a result of and contributes to polarization of conversations at a community level. People want access to non-proponent driven information. There is a lack of skilled professionals across the region—and a complete dearth in many communities—to advance energy

People want access to non-proponent driven information.

efficiency initiatives (retrofits, heat pump or solar installations, EVs, etc.), and there are currently minimal regional training and certification opportunities for those seeking to build that capacity. There is a lack of financial and human capacity—both within local governments and more widely—to advance initiatives to overcome

these barriers. In some cases, these capacity challenges create difficulty launching initiatives; in others they

are blockages to scaling-up emergent initiatives that show significant promise. Some municipalities would like to coordinate their own local subsidy programs to target local needs, for example, but professional capacity and financial feasibility are a long way off.

4. The role of education and research institutions needs to be better understood.

Capacity concerns vary across communities and sectors, as described above. Some could potentially be addressed by educational programs delivered by northern institutions (e.g., Coast Mountain College, UNBC), especially given a strong desire to retain students and trainees in the north. There is also discussion about the role of public education, particularly to support a “cultural shift” to foreground new perspectives on energy futures. The role of public schools also comes into play for younger generations, and climate justice was discussed as an issue. These priorities lead to questions about what northern educational institutions—at all levels—offer, or how they could pivot to better support low-carbon transitions. There were reports of good experiences with BCIT and the Community Energy Association, who have delivered effective and responsive training with a quick turnaround.

5. Many communities are struggling with asymmetrical power relationships.

In some communities there are strong industry proponents that are heavy producers and users of energy, but there is limited capacity within local government or elsewhere in the community to advance energy initiatives. This is exacerbated by a polarization of community-scale conversations, and a cultural resistance to innovation—at times actively enhanced by actors who benefit from closing down conversations and options. There is substantial frustration with the constraints that come with government-led funding opportunities, many of which are not responsive to community needs and priorities. These factors combine to create a challenging landscape for community-scale collaboration.

6. Energy and food solutions are integrated.

The relationship between energy security/sovereignty and food security/sovereignty is a persistent theme across many of these conversations. Participants see these as being deeply intertwined, and especially value initiatives that support both simultaneously. There

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are numerous examples across the northwest region of innovative initiatives focused on local food gathering and growing, reducing energy consumption, building healthier communities, and educating around cultural food practices. Sharing learnings from these initiatives, adapting and building on them are strong priorities.

7. Community conversations reveal a deep desire and opportunities for collaboration.

There is substantial interest in hearing what is happening in adjacent communities, including both stories of success and learnings from challenges faced. Some are seeking collaboration with other communities that share common traits (e.g., coastal communities) and some would like to collaborate with those that are pursuing shared energy and economic opportunities, such as those linked through northern BC hydrogen hub developments. There is appreciation for the leadership many First Nations are offering in energy solutions, a recognition of the importance of reconciliation initiatives, and an interest in stronger collaboration between

First Nations and local governments. There is a desire for support and guidance in how to facilitate multi-stakeholder conversations that are able to navigate polarization towards collaborative problem solving. Community or regionally-based education, training, certification and stewardship programs are a priority. There is also interest in how existing professional and community associations (housing associations, parks and recreation, engineering or construction professional associations, etc.) might offer forums to spread good quality information and capacity-building across the region. Finally, many expressed a desire to develop a stronger collective voice to lobby for/advance Northern solutions to other levels of government.



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Opportunities for Collaboration: The Afternoon Session

The afternoon session explored and refined three of the intertwined opportunities for collaboration identified in the morning:

1. Building industry capacity to support clean energy transitions in ways that support community economic development

Collaboration is desired to meet the strong need for enhanced community-focused capacity building in the areas of energy efficiency (construction, retrofits, emerging technologies), HVAC systems (heat pump installation and maintenance), and household-scale renewable energy system installation. There are also urgent needs for capacity to maintain and repair existing systems. Many communities have no professionals available to do this kind of work, and there are many fly-by-night operators who are doing this work poorly in ways that are harming efforts to ramp up the industry. At the same time there are young people seeking good quality trades jobs that support their communities, rather than having to leave their communities for work. Local educational institutions and initiatives (Coast Mountain College & K5T, for example) have been hit hard by the loss of international students and are seeking to pivot their activities towards regional needs.

There was strong agreement that collaboration can increase educational and certification opportunities that are relevant to and delivered in the region, leading to good-quality jobs and support for those seeking to transition to cleaner energy systems.

Collaboration can increase educational and certification opportunities

2. Supporting community collaboration on energy futures

A common theme in Community Energy Dialogues that was reinforced in the Regional Energy Workshop is concern about the polarization of the conversation about energy futures, exacerbated by a lack of trustworthy, impartial sources of information about new energy technologies and community-scale energy options. Most information that is available about energy options and technologies is either proponent-driven or not attuned to the realities of northern communities. This results in dialogues becoming debates over the merits of specific technologies rather than facilitating conversation about community priorities in relation to energy futures. This polarization makes it difficult for any group to advance initiatives at a community scale, even though in many cases such scale is necessary to advance promising opportunities.

There was strong agreement that developing forums, processes, resources or guidance for community-scale conversations that are informed by impartial information is a necessity for advancing clean energy options in the region.

3. Enhancing regional collaboration

There is a clear desire for shared learning across communities, and especially between First Nations and local governments. Promising initiatives are blossoming in many places—deep retrofits and widespread heat pump installation on Haida Gwaii, for example, and community-driven energy planning in the upper Skeena region. Learnings from these initiatives would offer valuable insight to other communities seeking to advance similar projects. There is also potential for the creation of information hubs, training opportunities or other resources that could serve and support the surrounding region. There is a strong desire to learn from and strengthen energy solutions that are from the North and for the North.

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Moving Forward

The Regional Energy Workshop gathered interested and engaged community members from across the northwest to tell their energy stories, and to guide the next steps in regional collaboration. Other Community Energy Dialogues and Regional Energy Dialogues across northern BC are ongoing. Key themes are now being integrated into the next steps for research, aimed at supporting the targeted and community-identified capacity building initiatives that have been highlighted in these conversations. The research team is also bringing these findings to wider audiences, such as at the NorthCAN Forum (Prince George, April 2025) and to policy-making and academic audiences.