



Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment for Northern British Columbia: The Case and Opportunity

Backgrounder

Residents of northern British Columbia are inundated with proposals from mining, forestry, oil and gas development, hydroelectric and others. In the face of this barrage of proposals residents are feeling alienated from meaningful input into decision making that affects their communities. Over the past 18 months we travelled to communities across the north and heard from residents about their fears and hopes for their homes and land. We spoke with nearly 200 residents in 6 communities: Prince Rupert, Terrace, Kitimat, Hazelton, Fort St. John and Chetwynd. Our report, entitled *Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment for Northern British Columbia: The Case and Opportunity*, is based on the conversations we had with these communities across northern BC.

The two overriding messages that came through the dialogue sessions were:

- 1) A profound sense of alienation from meaningful input into environmental decision making
- 2) A lack of faith in the provincial and federal governments to adequately manage the cumulative effects of multiple development projects

In our report we propose the use of Regional Strategic Environmental Assessment (RSEA) as a tool to address both of these problems. The current Environmental Assessment is fundamentally reactive in nature: residents are asked to respond to detailed proposals for particular projects. RSEA reverses this process by giving residents the opportunity to imagine the future they want for their homes and lands and to consider how individual projects fit into this vision. In this way, RSEA takes a proactive rather than reactive approach.

The failure of governments to adequately involve residents of northern BC in environmental decision-making is resulting in a break down in social licence, as can be seen in the relation to controversial development projects such as the proposed Site C dam on the Peace River and Pacific Northwest LNG's proposed plant on Lelu Island. Opposition to both of these projects is in part related to concerns over cumulative effects in the northeastern and northwestern parts of the province.

Cumulative effects can be defined as the “accumulated impacts (spatially and over time) from past, present and reasonably foreseeable future resource extraction, development and other human activities on the environment and human well-being.” A [report](#) issued in May of last year by the BC Auditor General found that the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations has failed to properly manage cumulative effects in northwestern BC. Our report offers specific suggestions for how both the federal and provincial governments can enhance cumulative effects management, in the context of a government-to-government relationship with impacted Indigenous nations.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of northern British Columbia are deeply invested in the future of their lands and communities. They deserve meaningful participation and control over environmental decisions that affect their futures and a legal framework for cumulative effects management that safeguards their rights and values.