

Rural Challenges in Agricultural Policies in the Cariboo Region

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Matt Henderson
Credit: Quesnel Observer

During the summer of 2023, I was fortunate enough to undertake a student-led research project of my choosing and direction. With such an amazing opportunity to explore a passionate interest, I decided to undertake research that would benefit an underrepresented community group in the region of Northern British Columbia. The often-overlooked group I chose was rural agriculture growers and producers in the Cariboo Region.

The research was grounded in community-based participatory research (CBPR). The type of research and associated ethics formed the bedrock for how communications with community partners and feedback sharing would be conducted. CBPR centers on the voices and viewpoints of the community members. This was an important choice due to reservations held by several community members in the study region because of historically poor experiences with university-based work. Paying attention to these concerns also enabled a focus on what previously received a very negative reaction from community members – the lack of reporting back. This required me, as a researcher, to differentiate my intentions in undertaking this research work from the many disciplines and projects conducted in years past. This included building relationships across many “burned bridges” and regaining the trust of various agricultural community groups in the Cariboo region. It is worth noting, as this project seeks to begin its next phase of work, that the mending of relationships is still, and should always be, ongoing.

Another advantage in utilizing CBPR is the fluidity of pivoting from an initial topic

or concept to adapt to a changing reality that would change the research trajectory. A community’s viewpoints and needs should be the guiding star of the work. This work is a prime example of this factor at play.

Two weeks into the research, my community partners and I discussed the validity of the topic, Housing Challenges for Multi-generational Farmers, which was the original focus. However, the community partners felt there were other policies that needed to be analyzed prior to a “deep-dive” into a specific topic. The outcome of this discussion broadened the scope of the project policy review while gaining insight from farmers and ranchers on what agricultural policies from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food and/or the Agricultural Land Commission needed to be improved upon to meet regional challenges in agriculture production. Through Dotmocracy, a facilitation process that would present the best ideas to date generated from research and the community partners while still privileging input from community members, five initial ideas of policy changes were generated in concert with the community partners. The process gains feedback from participants using a few initial ideas as a baseline. The participants then can place a “dot sticker” – a vote – beside an idea they agree with. Additionally, they can share ideas outside of those listed. This process is highly visual and engaging and gathers anonymous feedback from communities that is high quality and informally verified. The dotmocracy exercises were held at farmers’ markets and rodeos in Alexandria, Quesnel, and Williams Lake from June to August 2023.

The ideas and the resulting votes cast by participants can be viewed in the table below.

Initial Ideas	Vote Totals
Allow non-farming businesses to support farmers wishing to supplement their farming income?	82 Votes
Allow complimentary zoning for non-farming purposes that would still benefit the farming community?	44 Votes
Go back to the two-zone system?	48 Votes
Increase legacy protections for generational farmers?	76 Votes
Have a more flexible application process with the ALC? More considerations are made.	40 Votes
Leave everything as is?	0 Votes
Total	290 Votes Cast

In addition to the 290 votes cast concerning the six ideas, there were an additional 83 unique ideas noted by engagement participants. Participants could also vote on those unique ideas and the resulting top five were:

Additional Participant Ideas	Total Votes
Let farmers farm. It is currently too costly to run any scale of operation.	10 votes
More supports and guidance through red tape are needed for farmers.	6 votes
No more subdividing agricultural land for non-farm related housing.	5 votes
Costs are too high for young farmers today. How can we/provincial government support the next generation? This is a growing/significant issue in general, not just agriculture.	5 votes
Total Votes	26 Votes

The results gathered from these engagements presented a firm foundation for how to enact meaningful changes to our rural agricultural policies. As of the date of writing this article, the outcome of this work is still ongoing with the intention of recurring research work in the form of the previously mentioned “deep-dives” into specific topics. These topics

will originate from the input gathered from the community engagements. Discussion topics will match areas with highlighted priorities from that area. This next phase of this research work will focus on the most promising practices for increasing processing capacity in the Cariboo Region.

For those wishing to conduct community-based participatory research, I would highly recommend dotmocracy, as this process is rewarding from both the participant and facilitator perspectives, and ethical community engagement practices. As well, CBPR seeks the opportunity to hear from a "boots-on-the-ground" perspective. Changes that are meaningful and promise significant returns on social capital investment need that critical on-the-ground perspective which emerges from having lived alongside, and become part of, a local ecosystem tended by generations of farmers.

I must express my gratitude to the participants in this work who shared so generously and allowed me to reach further than I had any right to expect in the short time frame. Further, I am thankful for the trust PIBC has given me to conduct this work, which is now living on. Advocating for and supporting local and

regional policy changes to improve our rural agriculture sector is truly a privilege and I am excited to see where this journey takes me and my partners with respect to our primary goal of establishing meaningful, sustainable, and ethical changes to policies of northern food production on the province's arduous journey to food sovereignty.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge the following:

This work was conducted on the traditional and unceded territories of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, Lhtako Dene First Nation, Lhoosk'uz Dene First Nation, Nazko First Nation, ?Esdilagh First Nation, Xat'sull, and the Secwepemc First Nation.

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Finally, thank you to my community partners with whom I have gained a cherished relationship of knowledge sharing and life experience, and for taking a chance on an undergraduate student with a dream.

For further information on this and future iterations of my research work please follow my website at <http://alrpolicyreviewproject.my.canva.site>

Community Partners:

Lorne Doerkson, MLA for Cariboo Chilcotin;
Sage Gordon, President of the Quesnel Cattlemen's Association;
Coralee Oakes, MLA for Cariboo North;
Christa Pooley, Secretary of the Kersley Farmers' Institute;
Jackie Sarginson, President of the Cariboo North Riding Association;
Mary Sjostrom, Director of Electoral Area 'A' of the Cariboo Regional District;
Nigel Whitehead, Manager of Planning Services at the Cariboo Regional District;
Rick Wittner, President of the Quesnel Chamber of Commerce and President of the Cariboo Mining Association;
Roy Zisbricht, Son of Generational Farmers
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