



Community Summary Report #9

Location: Northern Alberta & Northwest Territories

Partner Name: National Farmers Union

Green Resilience Project Community Summary Report

Community Partner name: National Farmers Union

Conversation date: January 17, 2020

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1. Introduction

A. Summary

- The effects of climate change are already being felt. Farmers' income and livelihoods are directly impacted by the climate crisis.
- Current food system treats agricultural outputs as a commodity, not as something needed to feed the world. There is huge potential to be growing food for people in neglected spaces.
- Land must be respected and considered a community asset.
- Government solutions, at present, do not target the root of the problem. Community leaders and volunteers are filling in the gaps. This means that capacity is limited and solutions are often small scale. We need everyone at the table.
- Barriers to growing food need to be removed in order to encourage new producers.
- There is an untapped potential for growers to collaborate in direct marketing.

B. About the Green Resilience Project

This community conversation was part of the Green Resilience Project, a Canada-wide series of conversations exploring and documenting the links between community resilience, income security and the shift to a low-carbon economy. Working with a designated partner organization from each community, the Green Resilience Project aims to create spaces in which a wide range of participants can talk through the links between climate change and income security, and identify possible next steps to build or maintain community resilience in the face of these challenges.

This Community Summary Report reflects what we heard and learned in our community's conversation. Each Project partner organization across Canada will be producing a similar report. In March 2022, the Green Resilience Project will produce a final report summarizing findings across conversations, which will be available to the public and shared with Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Funding for the Green Resilience Project is generously provided by Environment and Climate Change Canada's Climate Action and Awareness Fund. The Project is managed and delivered by Energy Mix Productions, Basic Income Canada Network, Coalition Canada Basic Income - Revenu de base, Basic Income Canada Youth Network, national experts and local partners

C. About the Community Partner organization

The National Farmers Union (NFU) is Canada's national farm organization committed to family and cooperative farms. Promoting agroecology and food sovereignty for 50+ years, the NFU does not waver in our vision for farmers, eaters, and the earth, embedded in social

and economic justice coast to coast to coast, and internationally. The National Farmers Union is a direct-membership organization made up of farmers and farm workers who share common goals. Our goal is to work together to achieve agricultural policies which will ensure dignity and security of income for farmers and farm workers while enhancing the land for future generations.

The National Farmers Union is happy to partner with the Green Resilience Project as this conversation closely aligns with our climate and farm crisis work and we are committed to ensuring farmers are included in topical dialogues, and heard by decision makers.

D. Why this community was selected to have a conversation

- The farmers participating in this conversation all came from distinct communities throughout Northern Alberta and Northwest Territories and therefore the community description does not represent one specific location, but more a sentiment specific to Northern farmers. As mentioned, farmers are at the forefront of climate change and many Northern farmers and food producers face additional technical challenges due to remoteness, short growing seasons, and poor soil quality. It has been noted that the growing season is lengthening due to warming temperatures, but that there has certainly been an increase in extreme weather as well.
- Farmers across communities commented on the disappearance and/ or degradation of farmland due to development, urban to rural migration, extractive industries, unsustainable farming practices, and heavy fertilizer usage. Farming livelihoods are inextricably tied to the land; therefore, changes to the land due to climatic changes or direct human disturbance are aptly observed. One participant explicitly noted that the land needed to be considered a community asset.
- Northern communities are notoriously food insecure and multiple points were made on this topic. One being that Yellowknife in particular is only accessible by one road, a road that has recently been impacted by wildfires. Grocery stores only carry a three to four day supply of food and there are limitations on quantity and accessibility of food grown locally; therefore, road closures or extreme weather events may have a severe impact on food access. Financial barriers, including income inequality and homelessness, are also prevalent throughout the communities in question. Another comment noted that development, and mining specifically, has limited traditional foodways. This forced removal of traditional foodways - including hunting and fishing - inhibits the preservation of Indigenous knowledge.
- Participants repeatedly mentioned that intergenerational knowledge transfer and general knowledge about food production is disappearing. Climate friendly farming solutions include the use of cover cropping and hedge rows. These practices are being undertaken by some, but they are often underutilized and ignored for the sake of growth. Despite a sentiment by some that regional awareness and concern of climate change was low, a belief in the strength and vibrancy of the community was still present. Community dynamics, especially in the agricultural context, have

changed substantially over the years , but people continue to be resilient. There is strength in farmer's knowledge and community's willingness to make change.

E. About the conversation participants

of conversation participants: 4

Farmers and farmworkers are at the forefront of the climate crisis. The impact on income security in the face of climate change is felt acutely by farmers, farm workers, and landworkers of all kinds. Farmers are also business owners that rely on land to access income. Farmers need to be included and heard by decision makers on issues of climate change and income security.

The participants were not all located in the same local community. They were situated across Northern Alberta and Northwest Territories. Farmers' experiences also varied based on what they produced, type of marketing, scale of farm, among other differences.

The National Farmers Union leveraged our network of farmers to reach participants. Participants did not need to be members to participate. All farmers and farm workers, member or non-member from the region were invited to participate. The turnout for this conversation was low (4 participants). This was partly due to the fact that the National Farmers Union has very few members in this region, so we were partially reliant on invites traveling via word of mouth. All members in Alberta and Northwest Territories were sent email invites. Social media was used to extend the reach of the invite and several local groups shared our posts.

Because of limitations on the reach of our network in this region, the experiences shared were somewhat narrow. The voices of more marginalized members of the community, who are disproportionately impacted by both the climate crisis and our current food system, were not well represented during this conversation. Of the participants that completed the identification form, all reported being white and middle income. All participants in this conversation were directly connected to the agricultural sector and they represented both urban and rural and small and medium sized farms.

F. The Community Conversation

This conversation took place virtually over zoom. As it was a small group, we all engaged in one conversation without breakout rooms. The facilitator, a farmer and counsellor from Alberta, introduced the Green Resilience Project, National Farmers Union and key topics/terms as noted in the prepared slides from the Green Resilience Project. We did not make any changes to the questions, though feedback suggested that adding more agricultural context to the questions would have been helpful.

Despite being a small group, the conversation easily filled the two hour time slot and participants were engaged throughout. It was at times choppy because each participant spoke not only to their own experience but their own distinct community as well. Selecting a more narrow region may have been beneficial

2. What We Heard

A. How are the changes to our community's environment and economy discussed in the introduction affecting you, your family or the community as a whole?

- We need to stop talking about climate change as something that's coming and acknowledge that it is already here.
- *"I live climate change"*
- For farmers, whose incomes are already tied to the environment, climate change is inevitably going to create additional strains on income and livelihood.
- It was felt that governments, at all scales, have not yet accepted the urgency of the climate crisis and that they are stuck on small scale solutions. Regarding food security, this looks like investing time and energy into the food bank model and neglecting the root causes of the issue. This has a direct impact on the community because oftentimes volunteers will step up to fill gaps left behind by the government.
- The social fabric of rural communities has changed. The collapse of the family farm and the restructuring of the agricultural system are complex issues not necessarily relevant here, but the impacts which include depopulation of rural areas and increasing farm sizes means that people are literally further apart than they used to be. This limits opportunities for socializing and solidarity building.
- There has been a shift to consolidated farms, whereby farms increase in size and are controlled by fewer people, representing a settling into a new normal of large scale agriculture. There is an associated scaling up of machinery and increased capital needs. The farms that remain are the ones that benefit from the status quo.
- There is fear and distress in knowing that the situation is only going to worsen.
 - *"I have a lot more discomfort now in regards to our future than I used to and it's unfortunate that it's not given the priority by our politicians that it should be."*
- A focus on large scale production of commodity crops results in the neglect of opportunities for growing food for people.
- There is potential for small scale producers to increase their profitability through collective direct marketing efforts including cooperative stores and community supported agriculture programs. Rural Albertan farmers are well connected, digitally, and could benefit from collaboration.

B. How are these environmental and economic changes related to each other?

- Climate change causes stress on all levels of the food system. This was stress and lack of resilience was again highlighted throughout the pandemic
- Farmers are forced to adapt to unusual weather and pay to make these adjustments.
- Eaters are realizing that we cannot take stocked grocery store shelves for granted. Some are considering growing their own food to compensate for the lack of security.
 - *"Food security is a money issue, it's not a food issue so there's lots of food. It's just that a segment of society, unfortunately cannot access that food, we have a number of communities that have no stores."*
 - *"Once they do get out and try growing their own vegetables or their chickens if they have a chance, then they find it's really rewarding and enjoyable and they really want to increase that to take a bigger interest in where their food"*

comes from. I see climate change in one sense being a real motivator for people to make a change in their own lives.”

- There are many costs associated with growing food. The added unpredictability brought by the climate crisis makes this budgeting more challenging and increases expenses. Need for solutions to handle the upfront costs of starting a farm.

C. What are some possible solutions to the challenges we’ve discussed that will help the community respond to climate change and create income security for all community members?

- Basic income would remove financial stress and improve mental health for farmers and eaters. It could offer community wide benefits and boost the local economy.
- We are already paying for societal challenges and could instead funnel money into a basic income program. We need to debunk myths and false impressions of basic income.
 - *“Investing in people means high success in school, less mental health issues, less people going through the justice system”*
 - *“...we're not paying for a basic income, but we're paying for the justice system and the lack of success in education and for the cost of domestic violence, so to me we're already paying for it.”*
- Support more people growing more food and sharing their harvest. There is an initiative at the Yellowknife Farmers Market called the “Harvester’s Table”. Home gardeners are encouraged to bring extra produce to market where it may be sold to the public. If the program continues to grow, the market may hire people to assist with the backyard harvests. This program means that more affordable food is available to the community. It helps to remove the mystery of supply chains and food traveling long distances.
- Need for increased education about growing food and increased awareness about buying local.
- Opportunity to explore solutions in alternative land access models including the use of the commons and land trusts.
- Creating a local community and local food system. There was an example of an old airport and surrounding area being converted to a multi-use space including commercial, senior housing, etc.
 - *“Create local community by giving people what they need where they are”*
- There is always a need for education and mobilization. There is a perception that Albertan farmers are not concerned about climate change, yet they have come together to speak out against coal mining. This highlights the need for accessible information about the impact of the climate crisis on agriculture.
- *“If the community is interested in doing something they will, but unfortunately it seems like it's done in a form of a protest, as opposed to building something, which I would like to see more of”*
- We cannot wait for others to take action, we need to do it now. Everyone is up against a lot, so we need to support each other to avoid burnout.
 - *“Somehow we need to do it all. We need to educate the general public, the government levels, and we need to do whatever we dream or imagine. We*

need to go and find the money and do it and or not find the money and still do it.”

D. How do you think these solutions can be achieved to build, maintain or strengthen community resilience? Who is responsible for these changes—individuals, community groups, governments or a mix?

- *“It starts with an individual or an organization and it has to end up with a mixed, diverse group of people”*
- Everyone needs to be involved. Yellowknife has an agricultural strategy, but it was created behind closed doors with community consultation. We need more macro-management and big picture oversight.
 - *“Danger is that we all go from project to project and there’s no oversight or deeper evaluation of what’s working”*
- There is a lack of confidence in the government’s ability to act urgently and effectively. A question of how municipalities can support small farms came up and the response was that small farms are not even on their radar.
 - *“They talk about small businesses, but they don’t support small agriculture whatsoever.”*
- Room for powerful potential allies (like NFU) to support the work of individuals.
- A barrier to success for some small farms is an inconsistent supply. There is lots of potential for collaboration on the marketing front whereby small farms could come together to compliment one another and fill in the gaps of one another’s offerings.
- Farmers can be involved by paying it forward. Idea for a small loan program to help cover upfront costs. The loan is paid back by paying it forward to another small scale grower
- The entire food system is broken because it treats agricultural outputs as commodities and not as food. Many farms are growing grains or other products that no Canadian, farmers included, will ever eat. This is a broad generalization, but it does highlight the priority areas for funding and support within the agricultural sector.
 - *“It’s also important to remember that agriculture doesn’t produce food, it produces a product that nobody eats... it’s an industrial product, not that much different from coal or natural gas.”*

3. What We Learned

Summary and take-aways:

- Questions were perceived to be too open and there was a desire for more direct connections to be made to the climate crisis.
- Participants are very involved with their communities and are doing some incredible work.
- This group was very supportive of basic income and believed that it would be extremely beneficial to relieve stress on farmers and to empower communities more broadly.
- There is a disconnect between solutions being offered at the moment and on ground needs of farmers and communities.

- To what extent do you think your conversation built a wider and deeper understanding of the links and synergies between community resilience, livelihoods, income security and the low-carbon transition? Please explain your response.
 - 1 - Not at all
 - 2
 - 3
 - **4**
 - 5 - Very much so

It is rare that people take the time to consider all of these links, so this conversation was valuable in creating a space for that.

- To what extent did participants demonstrate increased awareness of climate change and their own capacity for climate action? Please explain your response.
 - 1 - Not at all
 - 2
 - **3**
 - 4
 - 5 - Very much so

Participants in this conversation were already quite involved in their communities and in climate action. It was a great opportunity to share their current endeavors and ideas.

- To what extent were new relationships between community partners and conversation participants created and fostered? Please explain your response.
 - 1 - Not at all
 - 2
 - 3
 - **4**
 - 5 - Very much so

This was a great opportunity for the National Farmers Union to deeply connect with farmer members. It was great to hear new ideas and about all of the incredible work being done in their communities.

- To what extent did your conversation create opportunities to foster ongoing discussion of solutions related to climate change, income insecurity and community resilience? Please explain your response.
 - 1 - Not at all
 - 2
 - **3**
 - 4
 - 5 - Very much so

The National Farmers Union is committed to climate action and this conversation provided an opportunity to share that with members.

- In your opinion, what does the community need to do next in order to build or maintain resilience in the face of climate change and rising income insecurity?

- Continue to build grassroots' movements and find support within the community.
- Increase collaboration between farmers and eaters. Farmers cannot fix the food system alone.
- Remain engaged in conversations that direct policy.
- Educate the community about growing practices, local food movements, and food sovereignty.
- Build capacity for regional collaboration including cooperative farming and distribution.
- Strengthen connections with more conservative neighbours.
- A diverse mix of stakeholders is needed to create solutions, so ensure that invites are extended.

4. Next steps

Clear next steps were not identified during this conversation, but feedback highlighted the value of spaces like these for sharing experiences and diving into a more solutions based conversation. Participants are interested to see where this research goes and if it will impact policy.

The National Farmers Union is sharing the Community Summary Report with our Climate Action Committee, as well as our policy and parliamentary strategy teams to determine next steps.