

Indigenous Renewable Energy Symposium Report

Edmonton – September 18, 2017

Executive Summary

On September 18, officials from Natural Resources Canada attended the Indigenous Renewable Energy Symposium. The event hosted by the First Nation Power Authority (FNPA), Montana First Nation and Green Arrow Corp. Akamihk welcomed between 80-90 Indigenous representatives from Alberta's Indigenous communities. The workshop was facilitated by Leah Nelson Guay from FNPA and Vicki Wetchie from Green Arrow Corp.

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The workshop included breakout exercises that addressed:

1. The values that will influence Indigenous energy future and how renewable energy can be developed in a way that honours these values.
2. Current energy issues impacting Alberta's Indigenous communities.
3. Visions from Indigenous people on a path forward.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Renewable energy developments in Indigenous communities should be developed and implemented entirely by Indigenous groups and communities.
2. A more holistic approach to Canada's future is need, one that is focussed on more than just economic benefits. Future energy decisions should be made based on community values.
3. Federal, provincial and municipal governments must align their priorities and work together towards common goals. Information regarding project development needs to be more streamlined, easily accessible, and most importantly, written in an understandable manner.
4. Education, both within communities and external to them, is an important component in preparing for a successful transition to a low carbon future.

POINTS TO REGISTER

The values required for Indigenous renewable energy development and the actions required to honour these values.

“Protect the four elements at all costs”

- Almost every table at the workshop agreed that any energy project would have to be environmentally friendly. It has to respect Mother Earth and all the creatures that inhabit it. Whatever you take from the earth you must put back. Projects that have the potential to improve the environment were seen as an important opportunity.

“Profit over people”

- This seems to be the current approach for energy development. Participants felt that a more holistic approach to Canada’s future is needed, one that is focussed on more than economic outcomes.
- Government priorities and community priorities are often different. Participants stressed that it should be community values that is at the front and centre of any future energy plan. Participants proposed that this information could be collected through a questionnaire that is completed by community members.
- Participants emphasized the importance of governments to recognize and accept that every First Nation community is different and will have different values. Also, as there are significant regional differences between communities, programs and policies should be designed to be flexible. There is no one solution or one program that will work for all communities.

Recommendations based on the current energy situation

“Get off the bus or you’ll stay on it forever” – Communities need to be involved in the transition.

- Now is the time for Indigenous peoples to act. First Nations communities, not industry, will drive the future of renewable energy development.
- It was raised multiple times that communities currently do not feel like they are as much a part of Canada’s move towards renewable energy as they want to be. Especially since the communities are the ones most sensitive to the effects of energy exploitation, globalization and market fluctuations. Participants mentioned that communities are often in areas where they must sacrifice for energy and economic development. For example, environmental damage from decommissioned and orphaned projects can negatively impact local First Nation communities.

“They don’t make it easy for us” - Communities are currently struggling to participate in the transition.

- Lack of resources and skills capacity were brought up numerous times as barriers for participation. For example, one group mentioned that they just do not have the resources to participate in Government of Alberta’s current Indigenous energy programs.
- Participants were concerned that current government programs for energy projects are forcing the communities to compete against each other to secure the necessary funding and/or additional resources.
- Currently, there is too much red tape and hurdles for communities to develop their own energy projects. For example, participants referred to the process for land designations, which are very complex and challenging to complete.

Federal, provincial and municipal governments must align their policy priorities and all work together towards common goals.

- Information regarding project development needs to be more streamlined, easily accessible, and most importantly, written in an understandable manner.
- Future policies or programs should ensure that communities are not competing against each other for financial resources - no community is left behind. The end goal should be that all communities are able to benefit and have the access to the resources they need. This would also help to foster partnership and collaboration among the various communities.
- Government should provide support to communities in the form of education and capacity building.
- Participants mentioned the need for an Indigenous representative within regulatory bodies among the provincial and federal government. Provincial Indigenous Councils needs to play role in code of conduct, and delivery of programming.
- Governments must also be willing to adapt and modify existing policy.

Education, outside and within the communities, was stressed multiple times as an important component to preparing for a successful transition to a low carbon future.

- It was recommended that every community should go through comprehensive community planning. This training should not only be provided for elders, but include everyone, paying special attention to youth - the future generation.

- This is essential in ensuring that everyone is aware of his or her energy situation. It was mentioned that often, since the Band pays the utility costs, there is really no incentive or understanding to “turn off the lights.”
- Another issue raised was regarding the lack of interest from the youth to get involved in the energy sector. Participants hoped that educational programs would drum up momentum and generate interest to get involved.
- An unbiased educational organization for Indigenous renewable energy developments (one that is not trying to sell anything) was raised as a potential solution.

Indigenous Visions – Renewable Energy in 2050

Indigenous renewable energy development would be redefined as projects that are built entirely for and implemented entirely by Indigenous groups and communities.

Clean electricity generation will provide a stable source of revenue for the First Nation communities as each successful energy project helps pave the path to financial independence.

- Eventually, participants hoped that this could lead to independent sovereign grids within the communities that are completed de-linked from commercial requirements and programs.
- Future projects would be community owned and operated, as this would allow for more stability and autonomy within the communities.

Indigenous peoples will have played an important role in the innovation of renewable technologies and systems of production, consumption and distribution.

- One possibility is harnessing and leveraging traditional wisdom to solve future energy problems – future technological advancements would have been developed from traditional knowledge.