



Welcome to
Calgary Renewable Energy Meetup
January 19th, 2019

Where do Renewables Fit in the Alberta Narratives Project?

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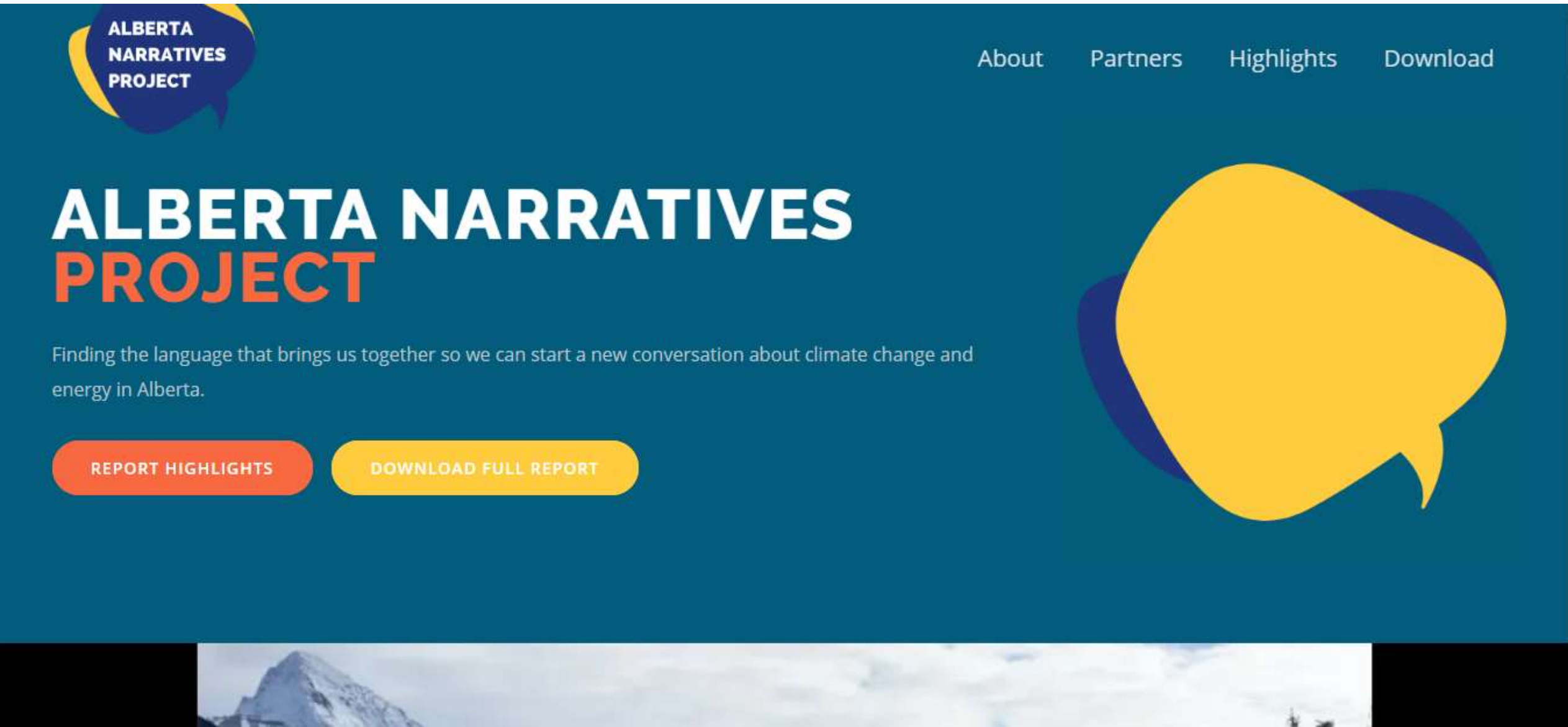
Overview

- What is the Alberta Narratives Project
- Objectives and Outcomes
- Highlights of the Project *via Screenshots*
- How Renewable Energy Fits in to the Alberta Narrative

Alberta Narratives Project

The Alberta Narratives Project is a community-based initiative to seek ways of talking about climate and energy that reflect the shared values and identities of Albertans and to provide a more open and constructive basis for conversation.

Website <http://albertanarrativesproject.ca/>





REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Our objective has been to find language that will create the best basis for a shared conversation and does not feed polarization.



Key Findings

Successful and unsuccessful approaches for communications.



A Common Narrative

For discussing climate change and energy in Alberta.



Albertan Identity

Findings and recommendations on what people say about Alberta.



Renewables

What Albertans say about renewables and transition.



Climate Change

What people say about climate change in Alberta.



Oil and Gas

What people say about oil and gas in Alberta.



Communicating Climate Change and Energy in Alberta

ALBERTA NARRATIVES PROJECT

Project team

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Lead Partners and Funders



Pat + Connie Carlson



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Alberta Narratives Project in numbers

19

Core
organizing
partners
and funders



75

Organizations
involved

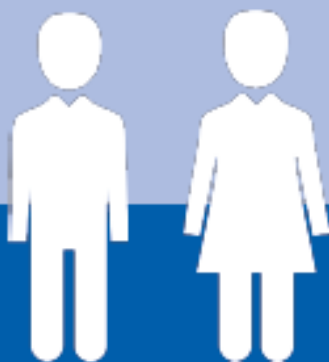


55

Narrative Workshops held

Hours
of group
conversations

120



482

People
attending
Narrative
Workshops

People
trained

87



720

Pages of
transcribed
conversations



Pages of marked up narratives

2,410

Each Narrative Workshop followed the same script, leading participants through seven successive topics:

1. **Values** – What do you care about? What do you dislike? What makes you proud of who you are?
2. **Identity** – How do you feel about Alberta and your place in it?
3. **Changes** – What changes have you noticed and what concerns do you have for the future?
4. **Climate change** – What does it mean to you and what do you think causes it?
5. **Climate change impacts** – What are the impacts and how will you and others cope?
6. **Energy** – What does the future of energy mean to you?
7. **Renewables** – What do renewables mean to you and can they replace fossil fuels?

The Alberta Narratives Project has three major outcomes:

1 It is clear there is a need, and a demand, for a different kind of participatory conversation on climate change and energy in Alberta.

We held discussion groups between April and June 2018 – called Narrative Workshops (see Appendix 2) – that provided nearly 500 people with the opportunity to come together and share their views among their peers. The groups represented a wide range of Albertan society from farmers to oil sands workers, to senior business people, youth groups and New Canadians (see Appendix 3).

For most of the participants, this was the first time that they had talked about these issues with people like themselves. Feedback clearly indicated that the participants enjoyed engaging in these conversations. In many cases, the discussions continued beyond the planned timing, some late into the night.

From these conversations we have identified language and approaches that are less divisive, speak to shared values and common ground, and could be the basis of a new and more constructive conversation.

2 We are confident that these findings are valid and robust. Our methodology is based on best-practice in social research (see Appendix 2). Our findings are supported by an extensive literature of existing Canadian communications research (see Appendix 5). The resulting project has become one of the largest “qualitative” climate change communications projects ever conducted.⁵ The speed with which this project has come together is remarkable and, we feel, a tribute to the Albertan entrepreneurial spirit and desire for a more constructive, balanced conversation.

Alberta now has an additional 87 trained communication researchers who understand the best ways of identifying effective narratives and engaging diverse audiences.

3 This significant capacity building leaves a legacy beyond learning new skills in good quality communications research – it also paves the way for a deeper, more considerate two-way approach in communicating climate change.

The following sections explore:



Key findings: most successful language and least successful language



Approaches for successful communications



A narrative for climate change and energy in Alberta



What people say about Albertan identity: findings & recommendations



What people say about climate change in Alberta: findings & recommendations



What Albertans say about oil and gas: findings & recommendations



What Albertans say about renewables and transition: findings & recommendations

- Climate change has a low profile and is not widely seen to be an immediate or pressing problem
- Political values were the strongest predictor of attitudes to climate change
- People's attitudes about climate change and its causes were also influenced by their personal connection to the oil and gas industry
- However, there was a diversity of opinion in all groups
- Most (though not all) people accepted that the weather is changing
- Albertans were split about whether climate change is caused by humans or natural variation
- Very few people mentioned burning fossil fuels as a cause of climate change
- People find it hard to talk about climate change and rarely do so
- People are dissatisfied with the current public discourse
- People want a new kind of conversation
- People would prefer to talk about preparation and adaptation than causes and mitigation
- Most people rejected the government's "Made in Alberta" message

Most (though not all) people accepted that the weather is changing

Scientists argue that the weather in Alberta is changing and that extreme weather events are becoming more common.¹⁹ The fire season has lengthened over the past 100 years and fires have intensified,²⁰ in part, because of climate change.²¹ Some researchers argue that climate change contributed to the severity of the Fort McMurray wildfires in 2016.²² The 2013 Calgary Flood and the wildfires in Fort McMurray were the two most expensive natural disasters in Canadian history with insurance claims alone of more than \$5 billion.²³ The frost-free period in South-West Alberta has increased by up to 20 to 40 days since the 1950s.²⁴ Summer temperatures have been consistently increasing since the 1950s²⁵ and Calgary has set a new record-high temperature, reaching 36.4°C in August 2018.²⁶

Most participants in the groups (and 85 percent of Albertans in wider polling) agreed that the weather is changing and offered anecdotal experience. The farmers were also aware of changes in their growing seasons.

“I’m sure everybody even noticed that in the last few years our winters are starting a little bit later and the spring thaw is happening a little bit later in the spring. It’s not so much April showers bring May flowers anymore, it’s May showers bring June flowers.” -Farmer Group

However, some rural conservatives, such as those in the Red Deer group, disagreed that the weather was changing at all and argued that Alberta naturally has variable, extreme weather.

Albertans are split about whether climate change is caused by human causes or natural variation

All participants were asked: *What do you think causes climate change?* This open-ended question, which contained no cues or prompts, provided valuable insights into people's core understanding and associations.

Recent polling finds that Albertans are evenly split as to whether changes in climate are natural or human-caused. This is markedly different to Canada as a whole where nearly three-quarters of people recognize the human cause.²⁷ This skepticism was reflected across the discussion groups, especially among conservatives and people with a close relationship to the oil and gas industry. One participant commented that "everything has an impact on the natural environment. Even wolves can change river flows." A scientist working in the oil industry said, "humans change things, but our impact on the climate is minuscule." In a group of people with conservative values, a participant commented, to general laughter, that "politicians cause climate change": in other words, that it has been created "to charge taxes or exert control."

Very few people mentioned burning fossil fuels as a cause of climate change

All participants were asked what they thought was causing climate change. Once again, they had received no prompts to lead them towards any specific answer. Among those who accepted that humans have a role in causing climate change, there were mixed views about the actual cause. Responses ranged from deforestation, gases, general pollution and overpopulation to more general moral or systemic causes such as “greed” or “capitalism.”

Very few people mentioned burning fossil fuels as a cause of climate change

The scientific consensus is that the burning of fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal) is by far the dominant cause and accounts for 78 percent of the increase in greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change.²⁸ Significantly, very few people, except within the two groups containing dedicated environmentalists, mentioned the burning of fossil fuels as a cause of climate change. A wider survey in 2017 found that only 9 percent of Albertans identified burning fossil fuels as the reason why they believe that temperatures are rising.²⁹

Very few people mentioned burning fossil fuels as a cause of climate change

Partners and steering group members suggested several reasons why participants did not mention fossil fuels: a general lack of public education about climate change and its causes; the focus of government communications on coal plants or policy; and the suggestion that “it is so obvious they did not mention it.” However, it was also clear from the conversations that people’s own relationship with the oil and gas made the connection challenging and uncomfortable.

People find it hard to talk about climate change and rarely do so

All participants were asked how often they talked about climate change with friends and family. 17 percent said that they rarely or never talked about climate change. Our sample was, inevitably, more engaged with the issue than the norm. A national survey found that 32 percent of people rarely or never talked about climate change³⁰ and this is almost certainly an underestimate given the wider evidence that people tend to overstate how much they talk about climate change.

Failure to talk was often described in terms that suggested a conscious decision to suppress the topic: as a farmer said: “we simply never go there as a family.” Even in the more neutral space of the discussion groups, people clearly found it difficult to talk about climate change.

Many of the workshop facilitators reported that the mood in their groups became “deadly serious”, “heavy” or “tense” once the conversation moved to climate change. The facilitator of a group of business people said that “this section of the session blew up emotionally.” The dynamic of the conversations often shifted at this point, lost its focus or veered into wider political grievances or safer “environmental” issues, especially recycling.

People find it hard to talk about climate change and rarely do so

Among those who expressed a strong concern, there were sometimes feelings of helplessness and guilt.

“ I already feel like my mental health is diminished by seeing climate change and feeling this hopelessness. The thought of the coral reef dying just breaks my heart. It makes me wanna cry.” -Youth Group

The responses in Alberta including anger, denial and collective silence are entirely consistent with those found in the growing literature on the psychological strategies people adopt to defend themselves against the personal challenges of climate change.³¹ They are also similar to those found by US academic, Kari Norgaard, on the social attitudes in Norway, a country that, like Alberta, is dependent on oil, yet considers itself to be socially progressive and concerned about nature.³²

People are dissatisfied with the current public discourse

Participants from across the whole spectrum of views were tired of the division and antagonism in the public debate. Environmentalists were frustrated with the political polarization and rejection of science. People of conservative values repeatedly said that opinions about climate change are being pushed “down their throats” and there was no space for “honest conversation without blame and shame.” The key issue, for both groups, is the imbalanced public discussion in which their views are not heard or treated with respect.

“People used to be so much more thick-skinned. They get offended and you turn out to be the worst person ever because you give your opinion when they ask for it. Sometimes you ask for their opinion, you give your opinion and they don't accept your opinion.” -Conservatives Group

People are dissatisfied with the current public discourse

As invariably happens with polarized debates, all groups felt that they were in possession of the real facts which, they felt, would win if only there was a fair and balanced discussion. Their arguments often contained anger towards people who disagreed with them yet no one suggested any process for reaching a resolution.

“The facts are always constant as well and I like that about it. It's not a gray area when it comes to climate change. The science is there, so the issues, the ones we're fighting in the community, it's pretty black and white with me. It's clear-cut, so I like that about it.” -Environmental Group

“There are facts and facts don't lie. Your opinion is not more valid than these facts and your opinion is not more valid than somebody else's opinion. You know what I mean? It's very frustrating when people push their opinions on others without really understanding the basis of their opinion. That's one of the things that really bothers me.” -Farmers Group

This view was especially pronounced among oil engineers who prided themselves on being well informed and having a rational science-based approach, though, on the whole, they rejected the conclusions of most international climate scientists.

“We're blessed to be as educated as we are and our ability to understand, so we have an obligation to help those that aren't as blessed as us to understand that.” -Energy Professionals Group

People want a new kind of conversation

People yearned for a new kind of conversation, especially within their own social group. They found the process of the roundtable discussions energizing and referred to them as a model for good conversations. They were able to hear and respect different opinions from people who shared their values and life experience.

“These are my friends, and I can talk to them, and we’re having these debates, these massive debates, and they’re very heated, but you know you come to a table like this, where there’s a diversity of views, and you might not agree with each other, but one-on-one, you can have a good conversation about it.” -Business Leaders Group

“They [Energy Leaders] have an opportunity to be leaders and I guess I expect them to be leaders in the interest of their own business. We need them to be leaders and change the discussion.” -Environmental Group

People would prefer to talk about preparation and adaptation than causes and mitigation

Many participants expressed a frustration with the discussion about causes and responsibility. They said that the scientific and policy discussion is overly technical and abstract, “focused on goals, not the long-term game plan.” Rural groups were most interested in knowing what it meant for their lives and livelihoods and how they needed to respond.

“ I think a lot of finger-pointing is what comes to mind immediately. You’re burning this, you’re doing this... sometimes I think, just address the change. Just acknowledge it and do something.”

-Rural Group

“ Why don’t we just look at how we’re going to have to adapt to make our quality of lives? Don’t deal with the who and why.” -Farmers Group

“ We can’t have those rational, fully fleshed out conversations with good outcomes because we’re fighting over the science. We say we’re not fighting over the science, but we’re at least fighting over the importance of the issue.” -Environmental Group

“ Everybody should be grabbing onto the rope and generally pulling in the same direction and allowing our economy to kind of evolve and keep pushing forward I guess, rather than just kind of digging our heels in and pushing up against each other.” -Business Leaders Group

Most people rejected the government's "Made in Alberta" message

The federal Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change requires provinces to establish their own policies to meet national targets. If they fail to do so these will be set for them. In Manitoba, centre-right climate advocates aligned to the ruling Progressive Conservative Party created a narrative based on provincial pride. Drawing on public consultation and polling, the "Made in Manitoba" climate plan³³ was grounded on shared values, especially the desire to maintain provincial control over policy and reject federal interference.

This formula has been repeated regularly by the Albertan government, for example, "We don't want a plan imposed on us by Ottawa",³⁴ "[We have a] Made in Alberta Plan...rather than leaving it to Ottawa to write a plan for us."³⁵

We tested this language and it performed poorly. Responses were split on the sentence "we need to stand up for ourselves, take control, and plan our own energy and climate change futures" and the majority of people across all groups rejected the phrase: "not resigning to policy imposed on us by Ottawa."

Analysis by the partners and advisory group suggests that the message may be failing because too few people feel ownership of the current climate policy. Unlike Manitoba, where the ruling party received a majority of the popular vote, "Made in Alberta" will require a broader base of support to be effective.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about climate change in Alberta

- Increase engagement, education and “climate literacy”
- Break the political polarization
- Support new trusted communicators
- Recognize the diversity of views in all audiences
- Enable a new conversation
- Keep climate change in the mix, concentrating on adaptation and solutions
- Avoid blame, recognize the facts and move on to positive solutions

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT OIL AND GAS

- Most people have a strong personal or family connection with the oil and gas industry
- There were no clear demographic differences in attitudes to oil and gas
- Oil and gas industry workers feel judged or criticized, even when doing the right thing
- The main concerns about oil and gas related to insecurity and dependence, not climate change
- People are unsure about when or even whether another oil boom will come
- People agreed that oil was a precious resource and that its revenue had been wasted in the past
- Comparisons with the Norway Sovereign Wealth Fund were not of widespread interest
- Pipelines were mentioned only rarely and then usually as a symptom of wider problems

Recommendations for communicators when talking about oil and gas in Alberta

- Recognize and be grateful for the contribution of the oil and gas industry
- Focus on vulnerability and security first, climate change second
- Do not use pipeline politics as an entry point for discussing climate change

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT RENEWABLES AND TRANSITION

- Most Albertans believe that demand for oil will continue for the next generation and further
- People agree that developing renewable energy in Alberta has strong economic potential
- Some argued that the next energy boom could be in renewable energy
- Most people did not believe that renewable energy could replace fossil fuel production
- The word “transition” can be used...with care
- Transition is understood to mean a gradual phased approach, not radical change
- People anticipate that it could be a “tough” transition more than a “just” transition
- Some argue that “transition” might require an increase in fossil fuel production
- Most Albertans want less economic dominance by oil and gas

- 10 • Diversification is not just about renewables

Most Albertans believe that demand for oil will continue for the next generation and further

All participants were asked when they thought the world would move away from oil. All accepted that the world is now moving away from oil but placed the time at which we would stop using oil far beyond their own lifetimes – in some cases up to 200 years away. In surveys, Albertans are twice as likely as other Canadians to believe that demand for oil and gas will still be increasing globally over the next 30 years. But, this does not mean that Albertans are solidly backing the oil industry: as so often they are split, with 39 percent in surveys wishing to see an expansion and 35 percent wishing to see a decline.⁴⁶

People agree that developing renewable energy in Alberta has strong economic potential

Across all groups, most people accepted that renewables had a role in Alberta's future energy supply. Engineers and oil specialists did not question that renewables had a potential, and became energized when talking about the technical aspects.

There was some cynicism about government intentions, as one farmer commented it is "just another way to waste a bunch of money." But this was unusual. Nobody argued on economic grounds that Alberta should not develop renewables and several people said that developing renewables is "essential" or "mandatory."

People agree that developing renewable energy in Alberta has strong economic potential

This finding is supported by wider polling showing that two-thirds of Albertans agreed with the statement: “if we are smart and thoughtful in how we plan a transition away from fossil fuels, Alberta’s economy can be even more successful in future.”⁴⁷ In the ANP groups, there was strong support around the language that renewables can provide new opportunities for work, innovation and enterprise – qualities that people associate with the province.

People’s primary objection to developing renewables concerned the speed of change, which, they claimed, has been overstated and their doubts that demand for fossil fuels will decline.

Some argued that the next energy boom could be in renewable energy.

As noted above, Albertans are used to cycles of booms in the energy sector and some are anticipating the next one. Some thought that renewables might provide it:

“ I think the [future] boom is gonna be more diverse. It's not gonna be a boom in the sense of one industry, like fossil fuels picking up. It'll be a boom where it's solar, and then there's gonna be advancements in different kinds of applications for the fossil fuels.” -Oil Workers Group

“ Yeah, I think about the next boom is more about innovation There's gonna be advancements in different ways to grab energy from the earth, geothermal, solar, hydro. It's not gonna be, all of a sudden oil's price skyrockets and demand's huge. It's gonna be, we've found better ways to do this, and how do we apply this in the areas we live? -Oil Workers Group

“ We'll have another energy boom. It might not be in the form of oil.” -Farmers Group

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT RENEWABLES AND TRANSITION

Most people did not believe that renewable energy could replace fossil fuel production

There is a strong consensus across governments and major agencies (such as the World Bank, United Nations and International Energy Association) that the world needs to reduce its use of fossil fuels and move rapidly towards renewable energy. In Canada, many national-level advocates speak of Canada making a total “transition” to renewables.⁴⁸ In this sense “transition” means a “replacement”. Many ANP audiences rejected this meaning, arguing that a full transition is not technically possible.

“You can’t just build a bunch of wind and solar and then replace oil and gas. That’s crazy. Who’s gonna fly on an airplane that’s powered by a wind turbine or go on a train or on an ocean liner or heavy equipment or fly to the moon? But I think we can certainly rely on wind and when solar drops further, it’s gonna be 8 cents here pretty quickly, then you can use that too, but again, it can’t happen overnight.” -Energy Professionals Group

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT RENEWABLES AND TRANSITION

Most people did not believe that renewable energy could replace fossil fuel production

People also questioned whether renewable energy could generate the same level of employment and income as oil and gas, arguing that renewable energy is more expensive to produce (though recognizing that the price is falling) and not viable to transmit to outside markets.⁴⁹ They also had mixed views about whether the skills of one industry could simply be transferred directly to another. And, as noted above, they believe that the global market for oil — and therefore for Alberta's exports — will continue far into the future.

The word “transition” can be used...with care

We wanted to test people’s understanding of the word “transition”. All participants were asked a carefully worded question: “Some say that the government and investors should be making a planned transition from oil and gas to sustainable energy. What do you think of this word, “transition”? Do you like it or does it mean anything to you?”

We found that people were neutral about the word, generally interpreted its meaning as a change or shift (rather than a replacement or removal) and accepted its underlying premise. Even climate change skeptics used it freely in their speech. The word fitted well with many people’s existing values: just as they saw the economic cycle as a metaphor for the life cycle, some people described “transition” as a “natural” and “essential” part of life and evolution, commenting that ecosystems die without change.

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT RENEWABLES AND TRANSITION

The word “transition” can be used...with care

However, as with all language, some objected that it could just be another slogan word lacking any substance and clear commitment.

“It’s like a politician who says that they’re going to bring change. Yeah, change for what? You’re changing from what we have now to what? I guess that’s part of the issue with the word transition is people are like, ‘well, transition to what?’ Like you said, is it technological, is it economical, is it what?” -Oil Workers Group

Another concern was who would manage or enforce the transition:

“It’s a loaded term. It gives this impression that somebody is the controller and somebody’s forcing us to go from X to Y.” -Policymakers Group

Conservatives sometimes disliked the phrase “planned transition” because it sounded like it’s “mandated” or “centrally planned by some government.” They favoured “energy transition” or “market transition.”

Transition is understood to mean a gradual phased approach, not radical change

People understood *transition* as meaning a gradual change in energy supply. They contrasted this with the impacts of a radical shift. An oil worker expressed a common sentiment when he said: “if we turn off oil and gas tomorrow, the Stone Age is here to come.” Another added: “there would be riots. There would be blood on the streets.”

Depending on one’s point of view, this gradualist approach was either a strength or a weakness:

- “Renewables, there’s gonna be a role there but it’s not replacing oil and gas, so transition might not be the best word for it.” -Conservative Group
- “The problem with the word “transition” is that it sounds too comfortable, too soothing. It implies that this is all going to happen over a long period of time.” -Environmental Group
- “In Alberta, transition means you can always change your mind and go back, change the government, go back to coal.” -Policymakers group

People anticipate that it could be a “tough” transition more than a “just” transition.

In their conversations, people were always more inclined to talk about changes and the economic cycles as natural, evolutionary processes that encouraged innovation and hard work. People from all groups welcomed the phrase “it will not be easy” in the test narratives as being honest and authentic.

We tested language saying that “we owe it to [workers in the oil gas and coal sectors] to make sure that their livelihoods are secured during this transition.” This sentence expresses the core principle of a “just transition” which has been strongly promoted by trades unions, the International Labour Organization, and the Paris Climate Agreement. However, there was little interest in Alberta in protecting peoples livelihoods in this way, possibly because of shared values of resilience to change and independence from government.

Some argue that “transition” might require an increase in fossil fuel production

From the perspective of climate change advocates, the danger of the energy diversification narrative is that it could justify an expansion of fossil-fuel production in order to generate the revenue to pay for diversification.

“We should make as much money as we possibly can with the resources we have today, and squeeze out our competitors in Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, and Nigeria, and sell our barrels today, and get as rich as we possibly can, and then use that for other good things.” -Energy Professionals Group

“Basically, for these next 50 years, we should cash in like crazy on oil as long as we possibly can.” -Rural Group

“It would be great if we could completely power ourselves renewably in Alberta and sell high-priced hydrocarbons to somebody else.” -Energy Professionals Group

Key findings

WHAT ALBERTANS SAY ABOUT RENEWABLES AND TRANSITION

Most Albertans want less economic dominance by oil and gas

In polling, when asked about the best way forward for Alberta's economy, a third of people say that it should prioritize oil and gas, but two-thirds feel it should "prioritize *other ways* of building our economy."⁵⁰ The findings of our research are consistent with this polling. A minority of people in the conversations strongly supported expanding oil and gas development, but a majority, including many conservatives and rural people, felt that the economy was too dependent on oil and gas and favoured wider forms of development.

As noted above, the primary concerns around oil and gas production were not about climate change but about the economic insecurity and vulnerability of the industry. There was a strong view among rural people that the economy continues to be too dependent on the oil and gas sector, reflecting the grievance that they had been marginalized in the process.

“They put all their eggs in the oil industry basket and I think because it was the money, so there was no reason to put the eggs in a deposit. But then deposit arrived and now I think Albertans learned a lesson. Well did we? Now with the pipeline, we're going right back and we're putting all of our eggs back in that same basket.” -Farmers Group

Diversification is not just about renewables

The discussion groups with participants from outside the energy sector – including farmers, teachers and artists – said that the narratives focused too strongly on energy as a whole and that their contribution was under-recognized. They therefore wanted to see a stronger focus on broad-based diversification within which they too would have a stake. This argument was especially strong among the farmers.

“ I think people forgot that before 1947 and the oil hit, there was agriculture. Agriculture was number one. Then agriculture became number two, and when the oil patch went down, it probably got back up to number one. Energy's not going to last for forever, but you know what? Agriculture will. So look after agriculture, look after the people in agriculture. Teach, educate the other people to support the farmer. But like we're saying, a lot of people don't respect it. And I really think it starts at the top level.” –Farmers Group

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

- The conventional “transition” narrative does not work well in Alberta
- The Albertan transition narrative should be one of diversification and broadening...
- ...a real diversification...
- ...within which all people feel valued...
- ...building on Albertan strengths...
- ...not just a “transition”...
- ...continuing a process that is already underway...
- ...in which all people can debate long-term choices...
- ...making a steady transition towards something new, not away from something old

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

The conventional “transition” narrative does not work well in Alberta

The conventional transition narrative follows an arc that begins by asserting the dangers of climate change, then criticizes the oil industry, followed by an imperative to reduce or close down fossil fuel production and an economic case for expanding renewable energy. This narrative was tested with all groups throughout the ANP.

This narrative does not hold up well in Alberta. Firstly, because many people’s loyalty to the fossil fuel industry led them to reject the threat of climate change and criticism. For them, the greatest threat of climate change is to their jobs and communities. Secondly, because renewable sources cannot simply replace the revenue of fossil fuel exports for a major producer.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

The Albertan transition narrative should be one of diversification and broadening...

The alternative narrative, emerging through the conversations, is a positive vision of diversification: building a stronger, more secure and sustainable economy on broader and more diversified foundations.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...a real diversification...

In the name of diversification, past governments have focused on activities that are still strongly dependent on the oil and gas sector, such as manufacturing (to supply the sector), financial services (to support it), and petrochemical processing (to use its products).⁵¹ These new activities actually reinforce the centrality of the oil and gas sector and the insecurity being tied to the “rollercoaster” of international demand.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...within which all people feel valued...

All people in Alberta should feel valued and see a personal opportunity. Diversification could include investment in agriculture, tourism, education and services. Renewable energy fits well within this more inclusive diversification narrative. If it does not have to justify itself on the same terms as oil and gas people will readily accept that it offers major opportunities.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...building on Albertan strengths...

This is a narrative of continuation, not transformation. It should recognize the contribution that the oil and gas industry and, especially, the people who work in it, make to the province. New industries, especially renewables, should be shown as building on the same skills and qualities many people associate with the province: especially initiative, innovation, and entrepreneurialism.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...not just a “transition”...

Although currently accepted, “transition” is strongly promoted by the environmental movement and could become associated with this single perspective. Other terms should be explored include *rebuilding*, *restructuring*, or *evolving*.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...continuing a process that is already underway...

People already recognize that change is part of life, and has been part of the history of Alberta. The percentage of provincial income from the oil and gas industry has been falling: from 36 percent to 17 percent since the mid-1980s.⁵² Communications should focus on the rapid growth of renewable energy, especially over the past ten years. This is a process of re-balancing that can be portrayed as a positive reinvention of provincial identity.

Recommendations for communicators when talking about renewables and transition in Alberta

...in which all people can debate long-term choices...

As noted above, people wish to weigh up and participate in choices. Investment in pipelines and other major energy infrastructure, including renewable energy, represents a commitment to different long-term outcomes. These can be the basis of a positive conversation about the “future we choose.”

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...making a steady transition towards something new, not away from something old

Optimal public engagement comes with presenting a forward-looking vision of the future and the choices needed to make those changes. A negative vision based on a rejection of the oil and gas sector will have some supporters but will not generate a new and broad-based engagement.



1. Build language around people's values and identity

There is a large body of international research showing that people's positions on climate change and energy are shaped by their identity and their values – particularly their political orientation.⁸ For this reason, our research began by asking people about who they are and what they care about. Effective communications must begin by recognizing identity and enabling an open and respectful conversation. We explored the ways that people think and talk about the future of the oil industry and renewable energy, but did not promote any specific pathway for either.

2. State common ground and values from the outset

There are so many things that we can agree on. We should not lose sight of this when there are issues that we debate. This does not mean that we need to agree – we should and will discuss these differences because they are important to us. But, we can share our different views and ideas and emphasize how much we still have in common. The project itself is a demonstration of how we can listen to each other with respect and seek a shared understanding.



3. Trusting the messenger will be critical to success

Because attitudes are rooted in people's identity, people will shape their attitudes according to the attitudes of the people around them and will listen to the communicators who they respect and whose values they share. Most Albertans are distrustful of the main sources of information on climate change, including government, environmentalists, and the media. Identifying new messengers within communities should be a priority.

“I think trust is another big factor in that, the reason why this debate is not happening – or one of the big reasons – is because people don't trust each other. People don't trust the industries that are saying 'we're doing good things', or 'the profits from there are doing good things.'” -Business Leaders Group

4. Remove absolutes

People across all groups strongly disliked language with sweeping generalizations: such as *all, everyone, every, only, never, none, the best, the worst*, even when they agreed with the general sentiment. They also disliked imperatives such as *have to* and *must*. Communicators should use these words sparingly. Communicators also need to be very careful with language that forces a consensus – talking about what “we” think or what “Albertans” want or need – especially if it comes from a distrusted communicator.

Discussion