B.C. Rural Economic Development Strategy

Building on our
Rural Advantages
The Government of British Columbia is committed to working with our rural communities to strengthen their resilience, create jobs and build economic opportunities while enriching the unique lifestyle advantages that rural B.C. has to offer.
The BC Jobs Plan 5-Year Update shows how much our government has accomplished to position British Columbia for long-term success and identifies areas where we see further opportunities for growth. One of those areas is our rural economy. All of B.C. benefits when our rural economy is strong.

Building on our Rural Advantages: B.C. Rural Economic Development Strategy sets out our government’s unwavering support for rural communities, and our long-term vision to back their economic growth and resilience.

It demonstrates the many ways we are working with rural and Aboriginal communities now—and how we plan to work with them in the future. This will create new economic opportunities that will bring the stable, well-paying jobs needed to attract and retain more residents, especially young adults and young families.

Our government’s fiscal discipline and strong economic leadership have placed B.C. in a position to be able to invest in our people, environment, communities and businesses. This is a tremendous success story that will prepare all of B.C., including rural communities, to compete in what has become a rapidly changing and often uncertain global environment.

This strategy shows how our government is standing up for rural B.C. to make sure it has the business, income and wealth to grow, prosper and create jobs.
I have always been proud to represent B.C.’s rural constituents, and I am sincerely honoured to work with them as B.C.’s first Minister of State for Rural Economic Development. I’ve lived in the Cariboo for most of my life. I’ve run my own business, and I’ve served as the mayor of 100 Mile House. I know through experience that the best way to support rural communities is to get the necessary tools into the hands of local people, so they can find their own solutions. That’s exactly what we are doing. Much of this Rural Economic Development Strategy has been informed by the dedicated work of the Rural Advisory Council. I continue to be impressed by the insight and advice from members representing all regions of our province. Their guidance helped make the Rural Dividend a tremendous success. I am confident we have already hit the mark, which is why we have extended the program for a fourth year, bringing the total to be invested to $100 million. I welcome the opportunity to work with rural B.C. and my Cabinet colleagues to advance this important rural agenda.

The Rural Economic Development Strategy aligns with the goals set out in the BC Jobs Plan 5-Year Update by focusing on ways our government is ensuring that all British Columbians, regardless of where they live, share in the benefits of economic growth and job creation. B.C. has the lowest unemployment rate in Canada and currently leads the country in economic growth and job creation. However, much of rural B.C., especially communities that depend on natural resources, is finding it difficult to share in this economic success because of global factors beyond their control. The B.C. Rural Economic Development Strategy addresses this head-on by identifying ways we can do more for rural communities to offer the promise of growth for the future. We are creating opportunities to draw young adults, who can lead that economic growth, to rural communities and encouraging them to stay. We are acting on the things that rural residents have told us matter most to them—diversifying local economies, providing training options locally so young adults have training opportunities close to home, driving innovation and competitiveness, and breaking down barriers to business and trade.

Our government has made it a priority to listen to British Columbians in rural communities, so we can work with them to identify and pursue economic opportunities. We have articulated our commitment through this Rural Economic Development Strategy. Rural communities throughout our province are well positioned to build on B.C.’s many advantages—our rich resources, our spectacular scenery and our skilled workforce—and to prepare to become part of a new economy, one that relies on creativity and innovation. As a life-long Okanagan resident, I understand how important it is to hear the voices of rural B.C., so we can work together to create a secure future for all British Columbians. I look forward to working with Donna Barnett to make this a reality.
B.C. Rural Economic Development Strategy

The Government of British Columbia is committed to working with our rural communities to strengthen their resilience, create jobs and build unmatched economic opportunities while enriching the unique lifestyle advantages that rural B.C. has to offer.

Rural communities are the backbone of British Columbia’s economy and way of life. At a time when B.C. is leading Canada in both economic growth and job creation, the B.C. government is exploring new ways to ensure all British Columbians share in this growth and prosperity regardless of where they live in the province.

That’s the goal of the Rural Economic Development Strategy. It focuses on government’s efforts in three key areas—building capacity so rural communities can attract new investment and residents; strengthening opportunities so that rural communities can attract and retain the people who will support economic growth; and diversifying rural economies to improve community resilience. And, as a key part of the BC Jobs Plan, this strategy will evolve to seize new opportunities and respond to emerging challenges.

This is especially important for rural communities facing difficult economic conditions and that have a high dependency on a single employer or are more vulnerable to downturns in natural resource sectors. The strategy includes actions to support their specific needs.

The B.C. government is working with rural British Columbians to help them build, grow and diversify their communities so they can create jobs and remain competitive in today’s rapidly changing economy. In 2016-17 alone, the government invested $3.6 billion in economic development activities targeted at rural B.C. such as improving connectivity and transportation infrastructure, and supporting Aboriginal people and young adults.

Building on our rural advantage:
$3.6 billion invested in economic development for rural communities.
(DATA FOR 2016/17)
B.C. is able to invest in its people, environment, communities and businesses thanks to government’s fiscal discipline and strong economic leadership. This is a tremendous success story, one that allows government to work with all of B.C., including rural communities, to ensure the province can compete in a rapidly changing and often uncertain global environment.

The Rural Economic Development Strategy builds on work that began in 2014 with the release of *Supporting Rural Development: Creating a Voice for Rural British Columbia* at the Union of BC Municipalities convention. That document articulated government’s promises to rural B.C., including a commitment to give rural communities a stronger voice and opportunities to develop local solutions to meet their specific needs.

The BC Jobs Plan created an economic strategy that is growing B.C.’s economy and supporting long-term job creation. The Rural Economic Development Strategy complements this, so those living and working in rural B.C. can benefit from this important work.
Delivering on the Promise to Rural British Columbia

Many of the actions in this strategy are based on advice and feedback from the Rural Advisory Council and other rural stakeholders/partners. Government is building on the success of the council, which has already brought forward new ideas to support rural business owners, leaders, workers and families.

The actions in the Rural Economic Development Strategy deliver on the government’s promise to rural B.C. to advance economic opportunities while enriching a unique rural lifestyle. It shows that government is listening to rural stakeholders/partners and taking steps to turn what it is hearing into action.

The B.C. government will continue to work with rural B.C., so communities can create jobs and deliver opportunities for their residents. This work is being done in a manner that respects the many past contributions of rural B.C., builds on advantages that are found nowhere else and demonstrates foresight of the strategic change needed to assure future success.

Rural communities in B.C. have long sought a stronger voice, so government can better understand their challenges and help them find solutions. The Rural Advisory Council is that voice. Created in 2015, the council’s members come from throughout the province and have diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

The council’s initial focus was on advising government in establishing the Rural Dividend. Members continue to provide advice on how to build a comprehensive approach to ensure policies across government are developed with a rural lens, and to establish processes and accountability to support this in policy making. They are identifying a prioritized list of policies, showing their impacts, and supporting government’s efforts to improve the related outcomes for rural B.C.
B.C. Rural Economic Development Strategy

OUR THREE PILLARS

1. Build the capacity of rural communities so they can attract new investment and residents.

2. Strengthen opportunities in rural communities, especially for Aboriginal people and young adults.

3. Diversify rural economies to improve community resilience.
Pillar 1: Build Rural Community Capacity and Competitiveness

The BC Jobs Plan pledged to make sure all regions of B.C. share the province’s prosperity. Through the Rural Economic Development Strategy, the B.C. government is building on existing initiatives and introducing new ones so rural British Columbians can have stable, well-paying jobs and enjoy a high quality of life without having to leave their communities.

Investments in rural B.C. form a foundation for future growth, economic certainty, and opportunity across the province. They will help rural communities remain vibrant, attractive places to live, work and visit by encouraging young adults to stay and attracting new residents and new businesses.

Through the strategy, government is investing in a wide range of programs and building the infrastructure that is so important to rural communities today—from highways, which link rural communities to the rest of the province and to key markets, to projects like Site C, which provides jobs for northeastern B.C. as well as clean, reliable and affordable electricity. The strategy shows how rural B.C. can be part of the new economy by attracting the growing tech sector to locate in and create well-paying tech jobs in smaller communities.

Government invested $200 million in the new Okanagan Correctional Centre to safely house inmates in the interior region. With the centre now operational, the project has added 300 long-term, family-supporting jobs in the South Okanagan for correctional officers and support staff. The project also contributed significant economic activity during construction, with a total of 741,000 person-hours of construction work. In total, more than 60 subcontracts were awarded as part of the project—with half of those going to local small businesses.

In 2016-17, the B.C. government has invested close to $1.7 billion in initiatives building community capacity, including infrastructure projects.
Accelerate our commitment to rural connectivity

The impressive growth and reach of the technology sector makes it critical to the diversification, growth and resilience of B.C.’s economy, and technology also makes rural resource industries more competitive in the global marketplace. In addition, the tech industry is highly portable: B.C. has high-speed Internet connectivity, a skilled workforce, top-quality post-secondary institutions and modern transportation infrastructure. And with a new investment of $40 million, Connecting British Columbia is expanding Internet access and bringing even more high-paying tech jobs to rural communities.

The Province is investing a further $40 million to expand the Connecting British Columbia program, which is improving Internet access and speeds to underserved and remote communities province-wide. This is in addition to a recent $10 million investment in Connecting British Columbia that improved connectivity for more than 200 communities.

Through multiple programs and initiatives, the province has directly invested almost $42 million to expand connectivity in rural and remote locales since 2008. Reliable Internet access supports economic growth, health and education in rural communities. For example, ABC Communications will receive $311,000 to improve services in the communities of East Horse Lake, Gateway, South Canim Lake and Sheridan Lake.
Government commitments

1.1 Invest another $40 million in Connecting British Columbia and support community planning capability so rural communities without the expertise can plan their connectivity needs for economic development.

1.2 Invest $9 million from 2016 to 2018 to install free public wi-fi in 25 highway rest areas to support businesses such as commercial trucking, keep travellers connected and improve safety.

1.3 Invest $500,000 to connect British Columbians in the most remote areas of the province to the Internet through the BC Broadband Satellite Initiative. To date, more than 4,200 households have been connected to the Internet via satellite services.

1.4 Address rural needs and foster greater collaboration between post-secondary institutions and innovation-driven industries in rural communities through the Innovation Network, led by the new Chief Innovation Advisor to the Premier.

1.5 Use new technology, so any community in B.C. can create a customized Job Bank using WorkBC.ca data to link local workers with local jobs.

1.6 Appoint a rural representative to the BC Innovation Council, and capitalize on new connectivity in rural communities by supporting regional innovation with actions such as matching local challenges with home-grown solutions and showcasing regional innovations and opportunities.
Improve transportation infrastructure for rural economic growth

Transportation serves the dual purpose of generating direct employment and underpinning job creation, development and prosperity. Rural communities rely on transportation networks to stay connected with each other, develop key economic sector—especially natural resources—and create jobs. B.C. on the Move, the Provincial Transportation Plan, sets out the key transportation priorities that will enhance safety, grow the economy and replace aging infrastructure and support trade for B.C.’s expanding resource sectors.

The new Irishman Creek Bridge on Highway 3 east of Yahk, an important crossing for travellers on the Crowsnest Highway in the Kootenays, has wider shoulders so it is safer for pedestrians and cyclists. The $2.2-million project was completed in 2016.

Upgrading side roads provides direct jobs and improves access. The $94 million invested through the Side Roads Program in 2016-17 included $6.67 million for over 80 kilometres of sealcoat on Highway 37 in the Dease Lake area and north of Kitwanga and $2.8 million to resurface Upper Fraser Road and Shelley Road in the Willow River area.

B.C. is prioritizing the upgrade and replacement of bridges and overpasses to accommodate the increasingly heavy and large loads that industry needs to transport. On Highway 97 northeast of Prince George, the province is investing $42 million to replace the Parsnip River Bridge and the Salmon River Bridge. On Highway 5 at Tete Jaune Cache, clearance has been increased at two CN overheads, benefiting local communities including Valemount and McBride.

The B.C. Air Access Program is providing up to $24 million over the next three years for new projects to improve infrastructure for small and regional airports supporting local economic growth and jobs by offering access for workers and equipment. Recent investments include $861,950 at Dease Lake, $1.2 million at Trail and $150,000 at Williams Lake.

The BikeBC Program is providing an additional $2 million this year for new projects for a total $18 million of new commitments over three years to enhance and expand cycling infrastructure. Recent projects include $87,325 for a bike corridor in Powell River and $99,600 for a trail in Elkford.
Government commitments

2.1 Continue to invest in the Cariboo Connector—a long-term strategy to four-lane and improve safety Highway 97 between Cache Creek and Prince George—with a total commitment of $133 million over the next three years.

2.2 Provide $270 million over three years under the Side Roads Program to support rural road infrastructure, provide direct jobs and improve access. New projects for 2017-18 include $1.9 million in the Quesnel area, more than $1 million near 100 Mile House, Quesnel and Williams Lake, and $1.5 million near Elkford.

2.3 Invest $60 million over three years through the Natural Gas Road Upgrade Program in northeast B.C. to improve safety and reliability for residents and industry in light of growing industrial traffic.

2.4 Invest more than $37 million in a provincial/federal cost share for improvements on Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert to improve safety and support economic development.

2.5 Continue to invest $5 million over three years through the Highway 16 Action Plan, which includes transit improvements, transportation grants, a driver education program for Aboriginal people, webcams and transit shelters.

2.6 Continue to invest in safety, reliability and capacity improvements on Highway 1 from Kamloops to the Alberta border with the recent announcement of the $450-million Kicking Horse Canyon Phase four-laning project; the $19.4 million Donald to Forde Station Road project; over $150 million in Highway 1 improvements through Salmon Arm and over $100 million in Highway 1 improvements in the Chase area.

2.7 Continue to invest along Highway 3 through the Okanagan and Kootenays by increasing capacity and rehabilitation in the Princeton, Rock Creek and Greenwood areas.

2.8 Support remote community access and employment opportunities with such projects as the Highway 99-Ten Mile Slide Project, $60 million in funding for a long-term fix on Highway 99 northeast of Lillooet.
03 Support rural communities in meeting key infrastructure needs

Helping rural communities meet local infrastructure needs—such as affordable housing, local roads and clean water and wastewater projects—makes them more attractive to both businesses and residents. BC Housing is also partnering with local organizations in rural communities to offer more choices for individuals with special needs such as seniors or people with disabilities.

Government commitments

3.1 Invest up to $45 million in new infrastructure projects by April 2017 through the New Building Canada Fund—Small Communities Fund.

3.2 Invest $148.5 million over three years through the Clean Water and Wastewater Fund so communities can plan and rehabilitate water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure, which lets them meet environmental requirements as they grow.

3.3 Continue the Infrastructure Planning Grant Program, which helps local governments develop sustainable infrastructure to improve public health and safety, protect the natural environment, and strengthen local and regional economies.

Communities rely on clean water and wastewater management so residents can enjoy safe and reliable access to drinking water. Government supports communities through the Clean Water and Wastewater Fund. Some of the projects awarded last year include a drinking water filtration project in Ladysmith, water supply main replacements in Powell River and the Central Kootenay Regional District, and water treatment plant upgrades in Dawson Creek and Invermere.

BC Housing has committed more than $170 million to help community partners create safe, affordable and quality housing. Recent projects include $5.7 million for 30 units for individuals at risk of homelessness in Merritt; $3.4 million for 10 units for people with disabilities in Smithers; and $3.6 million for 14 units for low-income households in Houston.
B.C. has one of North America’s most competitive, flexible and supportive business climates. This is especially important for resource industries—the biggest job providers in rural B.C.—that are facing new competitors and changing market conditions, and for small businesses, one of the fastest growing segments of the rural economy.

The government is focusing on areas it can control, including acting in recommendations from the Commission on Tax Competitiveness on ways to modernize the provincial sales tax to support competitiveness and create jobs.

**Government commitments**

4.1 Begin phasing out provincial sales tax on commercial electricity purchases by reducing it to 3.5% on October 2017 and eliminating it by April 2019. This will improve business competitiveness and economic performance, especially for industries that are key to rural B.C. such as commercial agriculture, forestry and mining.

4.2 Extend the Scientific Research and Experimental Development Tax Credit for five years to August 2022, to support research and development across the province, including in rural communities.

4.3 Reduce the small business tax rate to 2% from 2.5%, effective April 2017, which means B.C. will be tied for second-lowest small business tax rate in Canada.

4.4 Increase access to capital through the Small Business Venture Capital Tax Credit to $38.5 million from $35 million. This allows for up to $11.7 million in additional equity financing annually for qualifying corporations, encouraging investment in small businesses.
Government has invested more than $1.8 billion in initiatives that strengthen rural opportunities this past year, including training programs and support for communities and small businesses.

Pillar 2: Strengthen rural B.C.’s opportunities

The future of rural B.C. rests with the people who choose to raise their children, build their businesses and pursue their careers in smaller communities and rural areas. The Rural Economic Development Strategy addresses how government can better help them achieve their goals.

Government is acting to ensure British Columbians are ready and first in line for job opportunities in their communities. It is strengthening skills training and employment services, and investing in capital improvements for schools and post-secondary institutions. It is helping communities identify and take action on a broad range of economic development opportunities.

Economic realities differ widely in rural B.C. Some communities are prosperous, others are buffeted by challenging conditions such as a reduced timber supply caused by the mountain pine beetle. The Rural Economic Development Strategy has specific action items to help the most vulnerable communities, especially those experiencing the downsizing or closure of a significant employer.

To acknowledge the important role volunteer first responders play in rural and remote communities, government introduced a $3,000 tax credit in 2017 for British Columbians who provide at least 200 hours of volunteer service to a volunteer fire department, an eligible search and rescue organization or a combination of both.
05 Increase skills and training available in rural communities

Training is one of the best investments that can be made to boost rural B.C. as it ensures that employers are able to hire the skilled employees they need to grow their businesses, and that residents—especially young adults—are first in line for local jobs. Post-secondary institutions can draw new residents to rural communities. Through enhancements to the Canada-BC Job Fund Program, British Columbians can develop skills locally, employers can invest in training for current or future employees, and skills gaps can be addressed rapidly.

Government commitments

5.1 Establish a new annual fund for the rural campuses of B.C. public post-secondary institutions to deliver programming that responds to emerging rural labour market needs. This funding will train students for jobs in sectors such as ranching, ecotourism and forestry.

5.2 Invest $79.6 million over the next two years (2017-18 and 2018-19) to expand and update post-secondary campuses in Cranbrook, Nelson, Campbell River, Terrace, Dawson Creek, Prince George, Vernon, Kamloops, Kelowna and Merritt.

5.3 Invest $15 million over three years for trades equipment in B.C. secondary schools so students can explore the trades earlier in their education. Since 2016, the Youth Trades Capital Program has helped school districts strengthen trades programs in their schools with funding for tools, machinery and equipment.

5.4 Target $5 million from the Canada-BC Job Fund to extend Employer-Sponsored Training programs aligned with labour market needs in rural communities. An estimated $53 million in regional funding from the Canada-BC Job Fund has gone to support training programs in rural areas of B.C. since since 2014-15.

5.5 Create a dedicated $1-million Canada-BC Job Grant targeted to rural employers, and work with them to ensure rural residents have the skills training needed for local jobs and economic development.
B.C. is strengthening trades training in rural communities, so local residents can acquire skills to compete for local jobs without having to leave their communities. In 2017-18, investments include trades facilities projects at Selkirk College in Nelson, Northwest Community College in Terrace, the College of the Rockies in Cranbrook, Northern Lights College in Dawson Creek, North Island College’s Campbell River Campus, the Prince George campus of the College of New Caledonia, the Vernon campus of Okanagan College and the Kamloops campus of Thompson Rivers University. With these new commitments, $116 million will have been invested in trades training facilities and equipment in rural communities since 2012.

The Saw Filer Apprenticeship Program provides valuable training, so participants can fit all types of saws and operate, repair and adjust saw sharpening equipment. Provincially certified sawfilers are in demand by forest companies such as Interfor, Tolko and Canfor. Thompson Rivers University’s Williams Lake Campus is the only training institution in B.C. that offers technical training for these trades, and about 25 apprentices graduate each year.

In the community of Merritt, post-secondary investments include $1.5 million for a trades training facility as well as $2 million toward a new $8.9-million Centre of Excellence in Sustainability building at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. The centre will provide innovative lab space, demonstrate solar and geo-exchange technologies, and house a new teaching kitchen and greenhouse.

Government is investing an additional $2 million to extend the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers program into 2017. The program provides skills training and employment support to unemployed older workers across B.C. so they can pursue new jobs in their community. Horton Ventures Inc. in 100 Mile House received $82,000 to train 10 mature workers to re-enter the workforce. Last year $4.1 million was invested in the program.
06 Expand opportunities for youth and young adults

Young adults and young families are the lifeblood of rural communities. They offer the promise of growth for the future. Young entrepreneurs bring energy, passion and innovation. Government is creating incentives for young adults to build their careers and their lives in rural areas, and encouraging more young adults to return or relocate to rural B.C. They are the face of the future, and will help to bring rural communities into the new economy. The advantages of a rural lifestyle—a strong sense of community, affordable housing and world-class outdoor recreation—are attractive to young adults, especially those looking to set down roots and start their own families.

Government is investing in programs that help young adults acquire skills, find jobs or start their own businesses in their home communities so they do not need to leave. It also supports activities to to seek input from young adults on what would attract them to rural B.C., and what would encourage them to stay.

The Rural Advisory Council has identified the need to create opportunities for young adults in rural communities as a key priority. The council will be reaching out to young adults in order to open a dialogue with them to hear directly what steps are needed to successfully secure a future for young adults in rural B.C.

Government commitments

6.1 Formalize a process through the Rural Advisory Council to hear from young adults on the best ways to attract younger residents to rural B.C.

6.2 Invest $170,000 in 2017 in Futurpreneur to expand proven youth entrepreneurship programs, including workshops and a full suite of on-the-ground resources through the ThriveNorth initiative in northern B.C.

6.3 Invest $34,300 in a Youth Aboriginal Business Circles pilot project to help Aboriginal high school participants in Prince George, Kamloops, Kelowna, Neskonlith, Fort St. John, Moberly Lake, Cranbrook and Williams Lake create business plans to pursue their goals.

6.4 Expand the Find Your Fit program, an interactive event designed to help students discover B.C. careers, to 15 more rural communities.
Government is investing in programs that help young adults acquire skills, find jobs or start their own businesses in their home communities.

The Youth Aboriginal Business Circles pilot is providing the skills, knowledge and confidence so Aboriginal high school participants can create a business plan and pursue their goals. It will help young Aboriginal entrepreneurs launch businesses in rural B.C., like Jordan Low, who owns and operates a Freshslice pizza franchise in Prince George.

With support from the B.C. government, Futurpreneur has offered Rock My Business Plan workshops across the province, supporting young entrepreneurs to gain the skills needed to start their own businesses. Futurepreneur has already provided tools and knowledge to help youth launch 1,200 new businesses in B.C., leading to 5,800 new jobs.

The Find Your Fit tour is a fun, interactive event for students that brings career discovery tools to rural communities and other areas of the province to help ensure that all regions share in B.C.’s prosperity. From nurse to welder or a career in technology, students get a hands-on experience at up to 16 different career stations. Parents, teachers and career counsellors also benefit by discovering ways to support youth in their career exploration. The tour has had more than 200,000 participants so far, including students from large and small communities across B.C. such as Port Alberni, Dease Lake, Valemount, Clearwater, Burns Lake, Chetwynd, Fort St. James and Cranbrook.
Helping Aboriginal people achieve success is one of government’s highest priorities. Aboriginal communities share similar economic development challenges and opportunities as other rural communities, and programs are in place to support their economic development both by providing business skills in traditional sectors and offering the training and technology needed to prepare them for the new economy. Aboriginal youth represent a huge pool of new talent—they are the youngest and fastest-growing population group in B.C. In the Skills for Jobs Blueprint, government committed to increasing the Aboriginal workforce participation by 15,000 by 2024.

**Government commitments**

7.1 Invest up to $9.3 million in 2017-18 through the Aboriginal Community-Based Training Partnerships Program. To date, 110 projects have been funded in more than 70 communities throughout the province.

7.2 Invest up to $10 million in 2017-18 through the Aboriginal Skills Training Development Fund—to date, more than 40 projects have been funded in Aboriginal communities, primarily in the north.

7.3 Engage 40 communities and create or maintain 15 businesses within two years through the Aboriginal Forest Sector Technical Support Program, offering advice so Aboriginal communities can develop and expand wood products businesses.

7.4 Invest $200,000 in 2017-18 through the First Nations Agriculture Business Development initiative, working with Aboriginal communities to improve their agriculture and business management knowledge, skills and capacity.

7.5 Invest $8 million over the next three years through the First Nations Clean Energy Business Fund to increase Aboriginal community participation in the clean energy sector within their traditional territories.

7.6 Continue to share royalties payable by new mines and major mine expansions with Aboriginal communities to help enhance their governance, social, economic and cultural well-being.
In 2015-16, the Aboriginal Community-Based Training Partnerships program funded a partnership between Vancouver Island University, Heiltsuk Tribal Council and North Island College to train 28 Aboriginal learners in ecotourism. Participants graduate with the skills needed for entry-level leadership and guiding positions to work at resorts, outdoor centres, and other wilderness and adventure businesses. Fourteen participants successfully completed the first cohort and the second cohort is currently underway.

Through the Aboriginal Skills Training Development Fund, Gitxsan communities will receive $1.5 million over two years to train 345 members in a variety of areas such as security, camp services, carpentry foundations, occupational first aid, heavy equipment operators and specialized driving certifications.

In 2016, B.C. Aboriginal communities received $1.2 million through the First Nations Clean Energy Business Fund to reduce their reliance on diesel fuel. This included $400,000 for the Kwadacha Nation, which also received $500,000 through the Rural Dividend to help it install a bioenergy system in the remote northern community of Fort Ware that will use local wood biomass instead of diesel and propane. In addition to environmental benefits, the new $4-million combined heat and power system will create jobs for youth and skilled workers, support local wood harvesting and sawmill opportunities, and earn revenue through an agreement with BC Hydro.

In the Skills for Jobs Blueprint, government committed to increasing the Aboriginal workforce participation by 15,000 by 2024.
**08 Increase outreach to support vulnerable communities**

B.C. communities have varying degrees of economic strength. Some have stable, diverse economies and others face challenges which can be especially acute if they depend on a single employer or resource industry. The government is focusing additional efforts on communities that are more vulnerable to economic downturn to help them accelerate economic growth and diversification.

**Government commitments**

8.1 Work with local communities in 2017 to conduct outreach sessions in communities impacted by the mountain pine beetle infestation to help local residents chart new pathways to economic growth and resiliency.

8.2 Strengthen support across government for communities that experience the loss of a major employer, with efforts focused on worker transition, community services, and economic development and diversification.

8.3 Invest $1.5 million through the Rapid Response Fund to support short-term skills training to meet urgent, emerging labour market needs in vulnerable communities.
The province’s community transition team co-ordinates and focuses government support and works closely with local governments when communities are impacted by a significant economic event. For example, 24 workers affected by the closure of a sawmill in Merritt in 2016 have accessed training opportunities at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology focused on working in the oil and natural gas industry. The Province also collaborated with the local Merritt WorkBC office to host a job fair and training opportunities event to support impacted workers and residents, including Aboriginal people, for new job prospects and local economic development opportunities.

In September 2016, about 100 people gathered in Quesnel to discuss opportunities that could be pursued to create jobs and diversify the local economy, such as strengthening tourism and deriving more value from the forest resource. The North Cariboo Community Outreach Session, led by Coralee Oakes, B.C.’s Minister of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction, was the first in a series of meetings the province plans to hold in the region, which is facing a declining timber supply as a result of the mountain pine beetle infestation. Government will work with local communities to conduct additional sessions in 2017 to promote new opportunities and explore existing government programs and services available to assist communities and workers.

Through its integrated rapid Community Transition Response, the B.C. government responds promptly when rural communities face significant job losses—with services and supports for workers, their families and local businesses. After a series of coal mine closures in Tumbler Ridge in 2014, a government transition team worked with community stakeholders to co-ordinate services and supports for the 850 impacted employees.
Pillar 3: Diversify and Sustain Rural Economies

Rural communities have made significant contributions to B.C.’s economy, building on the province’s many unique advantages—especially in the natural resources sectors such as forestry, agriculture, tourism, mining and oil and gas.

Government is leveraging these strengths to help rural B.C. attract new investment. With advice from the Rural Advisory Council it is exploring new ways to work directly with rural communities so they can be engaged in and informed about new work on the land base in their regions and how this might affect them.

Government remains committed to improving B.C.’s business-friendly climate by cutting red tape and attracting new investment, making it easier to start and grow a small business. It is looking for ways to encourage the development of new technology and innovation in rural communities, which are closest to resource industries such as forestry and agriculture.

Government is exploring new ways to work directly with rural communities so they can be engaged in and informed about new work on the land base in their regions and how this might affect them.

B.C. is investing $10 million to the Island Coastal Economic Trust in 2017-18 for job creation and economic diversification activities in the Central South Island Region and North Island-Sunshine Coast Region. This funding supports projects like the Cowichan Incubator Seed Farm, which is helping improve community food security and economic diversification by creating a community seed bank and regional centre for seed education and training.
Increase the Rural Dividend to meet rural community needs

The $100-million, four-year Rural Dividend is the central plank in government’s support for rural B.C. and was developed specifically to support rural communities. A community-driven initiative, it responds to the local needs of B.C.’s small rural communities and contributes to their strength and sustainability. The program was designed to help rural communities with a population of 25,000 or less reinvigorate and diversify their local economies. It recognizes both the contributions they have made to B.C.’s economy and the challenges they face to diversify beyond natural resources.

Government commitments

9.1 Invest up to $25 million in rural communities by April 2017 through the first and second intakes of the Rural Dividend.

9.2 Invest an additional $25 million to continue the Rural Dividend into 2019-2020, bringing the total funding over four years to $100 million helping to reinvigorate and diversify rural communities.

9.3 Look for ways to improve the Rural Dividend after each intake, so it achieves the highest efficiency and effectiveness, and better supports rural communities.

The Rural Dividend – now a four-year, $100-million program

Launched in 2016, the Rural Dividend is already making a difference—and it will be able to achieve even more now that government has increased the investment to $100 million and extended it to four years from three. The program supports the wellness, sustainability and livability of B.C. communities with a population of 25,000 or less.

The first Rural Dividend intake led to more than 700 inquiries and a total of 180 applications from Aboriginal communities, local government and non-profits. With the completion of the second intake, another 289 applications were submitted. In the first year alone, the program is awarding up to $25 million for projects to diversify and strengthen rural economies from Dease Lake to Cranbrook to Port Alberni, allowing rural applicants to develop exciting new projects to diversify and strengthen their economies.
Support the growth of rural small businesses

Small businesses are at the heart of rural communities, providing services and creating a large percentage of local jobs. Government has programs to support their growth and productivity and find ways to reduce red tape. The Small Business Roundtable includes community leaders from across B.C. who identify ways to enhance small business growth and success. Discussions with this important group have led several initiatives to encourage small business growth in B.C., and make it easier for them to do business.

Government commitments

10.1 Invest $250,000 to expand the Export Navigator in 2017. The program pilot in Prince George, Vernon, Port Alberni and Comox is helping small businesses and entrepreneurs develop export capacity and gain access to new markets.

10.2 Increase the number of mobile business licence agreements by 50% by 2020. The agreements save mobile businesses such as contractors and caterers time and money by allowing them to operate in multiple jurisdictions with the purchase of one licence.

10.3 Pause the phase out of the preferential tax rate for credit unions, leaving it at 80% for the 2017 tax year. Credit unions play an important role in rural communities by providing financial services to businesses and individuals and by supporting local projects.

10.4 Continue to cut red tape by making provincial services and requirements easy, accessible and predictable so that small businesses can effectively manage and navigate regulatory and reporting requirements. Government has extended its commitment to a net zero increase of regulatory requirements to 2019.

B.C. is supporting small and regional breweries—like Three Ranges Brewing Company in Valemount—by reducing the mark-up rate for craft beer products. The $10 million in mark-up relief means craft breweries have the increased financial capacity to grow and expand. It is one of a number of measures government recently introduced to support the burgeoning industry.
11 Accelerate tourism and recreation opportunities

B.C.’s rural communities are home to an outstanding variety of spectacular natural, cultural and heritage attributes that appeal to visitors from around the world and create jobs across rural B.C. Destination BC promotes the development and growth of tourism—including the fast-growing adventure tourism sector—throughout the province, working with regional, community and industry partners on programs designed to support growth and create jobs through cooperative marketing and development initiatives. Rural tourism options include everything from the fast-growing adventure tourism and agri-tourism to hunting and fishing including guiding and outfitting which have long been an important part of B.C.’s outdoor heritage.

Government commitments

11.1 Deliver tourism opportunities in 2017 to rural communities across B.C. through co-operative marketing partnerships, new destination development strategies and innovative visitor services.

11.2 Commit $22.9 million over five years, beginning in 2016-17, to create more than 1,900 new campsites in provincial parks and at recreation sites, many of them in rural areas. This in addition to the $39 million invested in 2017-18 for operations in B.C. provincial parks.

11.3 Invest $26 million over three years to enhance recreation, conservation and stewardship activities in provincial parks, in addition to a $10 million endowment to the BC Parks Foundation in 2017-18.

11.4 Invest $5.65 million in 2016-17 to help develop a network of destination trails through projects funded under the Rural Dividend and the Trails Strategy for British Columbia.

11.5 Restore the seasonal direct ferry service between Port Hardy and Bella Coola in 2018 to support Aboriginal tourism and the mid-coast economy through new cultural and eco-tourism options.

11.6 Work with industry to prepare strategies that support the growing potential to advance adventure tourism and film tourism.
The B.C. government is investing $5.65 million in 2016-17 through the BC Trails Strategy and Rural Dividend to support projects that will contribute to a network of destination trails and support rural economic development throughout the province. In 2016, under the Rural Dividend, the province provided $100,000 to the Village of McBride to build new mountain bike trails for the McBride Peak and Teare Mountain Trail Network.

Government currently invests $31 million a year for both facilities and services in its world-renowned provincial park system. Government has committed $22.9 million beginning in 2016-17 to create more than 1,900 new campsites in popular parks and recreation sites. The Province continues to invest $15 million to maintain and refurbish existing campsites and backcountry recreation sites throughout B.C.

B.C.’s diverse and abundant wildlife populations make the province an attractive destination for visitors from around the world. Government is committed to healthy and sustainable wildlife populations. In 2016-17, the focus was on moose, with an investment of $1.9 million for a moose enhancement strategy.

B.C. is a popular location for films and television series—Thompson-Nicola Regional District alone has been home to a number of productions, including A-Team, 2012, Shooter, the Battlestar Galactica series and many more. The Province is exploring the potential of film tourism to draw fans to the filming locations of their favourite films.

A seasonal direct ferry service between Port Hardy and Bella Coola will be restored in summer 2018, supporting Aboriginal tourism and the mid-coast economy. This will create jobs and economic opportunities through new cultural and eco-tourism and adventure tourism options—including attracting international visitors to the Great Bear Rainforest.

B.C. is increasing its investment in provincially owned heritage sites to $6.5 million in 2016-17 from $4.8 million in 2015-16. This includes $3.5 million to ensure Barkerville Historic Town and Park can continue to entertain and inform visitors, and encourage them to explore the backcountry. Barkerville contributes $25 million and 168 jobs to the regional economy.
B.C.’s agrifood sector has a worldwide reputation for producing innovative, safe, high-quality and great-tasting food.

**Government commitments**

12.1 Invest more than $480,000 in 2016-17 through the Canada-BC Agri-Innovation Program to support innovative projects in rural B.C. communities. The program’s goal is to accelerate the pace of innovation in B.C.’s agri-foods sector.

12.2 Provide rebates of up to $3,500 through a new Livestock Tag Reader Rebate Program, so small ranchers can purchase equipment to enhance food safety and food traceability protocols.

12.3 Invest $600,000 in 12 communities through the New Entrant Strategy to support young farmers and expand opportunities for them to access land.

12.4 Invest $10 million in 2017-18 for multi-year projects to manage invasive plant species that can cause significant economic and environmental damage in B.C., and to replace Crown-owned range fencing.

12.5 Support the BC Hazelnut Growers Association’s multi-year effort to rebuild B.C.’s hazelnut industry, including a partnership with the University of the Fraser Valley to develop value-added processing equipment and marketing to encourage more people to establish orchards. There is significant potential in the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan, the Gulf Islands and Vancouver Island for hazelnut production and value-added products include roasted nuts, nut butter, oil and protein powder.

12.6 Invest $4 million over two years in the Provincial Livestock Fencing Program to help B.C. ranchers and farmers keep their livestock safe and businesses thriving.
Agritourism generates a lot of economic activity in small communities. With the help of $9,443 through the Buy Local Program, Howling Moon Cider House near Oliver has created a visitor experience at the farm gate cidery. It encourages consumers to participate in an agricultural experience, and it provides farmers with the opportunity to consider benefits of replanting and growing heirloom and heritage variety cider apples as a strategy for reviving the B.C. apple industry.

The B.C. government has increased loan guarantees to $15 million from $9.75 million for two popular programs, so ranchers can buy additional cattle. The Bred Heifer Association Loan Guarantee and the Feeder Association Loan Guarantee programs help ranchers in B.C.’s top beef producing regions of Thompson-Okanagan, Cariboo, Peace River and Nechako.

In partnership with the BC Cattlemen’s Association, the Province has invested $14 million since 2010 to construct nearly 900 kilometres of fencing to help farmers and ranchers keep their livestock safe. The investment of $4 million for 2016 and 2017 accounts for 250 kilometres of this fencing.

The District of Barriere received $43,600 through the Rural Dividend program for a one-year pilot project to test two new agri-business concepts, help develop research opportunities, and offer tours for visitors at its solar aquatics water reclamation centre, which treats sewage and other wastewater with biological methods using plant and bacterial life.

The B.C. government is investing $10 million in 2017-18 to support new land management initiatives including range fencing repairs and multi-year invasive plant management projects with partners such as regional weed committees, the British Columbia Cattlemen’s Association and Ducks Unlimited. The projects will create local jobs and address an estimated $50 million in annual crop loss in B.C. caused by invasive plants. Recognizing the importance of controlling invasive plants in rural B.C., government has contributed over $15 million to invasive plant management and control since 2013.
The forest sector supports high-paying jobs for tens of thousands of British Columbians.

The forest sector is one of B.C.’s founding industries, and continues to be a critical economic driver today. Nowhere is this more significant than in rural B.C. where it supports high-paying jobs for tens of thousands of British Columbians. The Wood Secretariat and Forestry Fibre Action Plan are looking for ways to achieve the highest value for the resource, and maximize employment and business opportunities.

Government commitments

13.1 Invest $150 million in 2016-17 as one-time funding to the independent Forest Enhancement Society of British Columbia to rehabilitate and reforest damaged forest stands and plant tens of millions of trees, which will help fight climate change and create more than 3,000 rural jobs. This is in addition to the $85 million allocated to the society to date.

13.2 Create 500 jobs in 2017-18 by implementing actions in the Forestry Fibre Action Plan that allow secondary fibre users to use an additional one million cubic metres of residual forest fibre by improving their access to lower-quality wood and wood residue.

13.3 Task the new Wood Secretariat to recommend ways to promote the growth of the value-added and specialty wood manufacturing sectors, creating well-paying jobs and other community benefits.

13.4 Work through the BC Pulp and Paper Bio-Products Alliance to find opportunities to diversify and create new jobs by pursuing development of new transformative technologies best suited for the B.C. forest sector.

13.5 Work with FPInnovations on a new Clean-Tech Innovation Strategy for the B.C. forest sector, driving commercialization of projects that improve resource efficiency and increase product value while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

13.6 Invest $9 million over three years to support implementation of the Forest Carbon Initiative and other forest enhancement initiatives, to restore forests, to reduce carbon emissions in the forest sector and to capture carbon through restoration of damaged forests.

13.7 Invest $7.5 million over three years to upgrade BC Wildfire Service facilities in addition to a new facility opened in Williams Lake in March 2017.
An investment of $150 million in the Forest Enhancement Society of British Columbia means tens of millions more trees can be planted in B.C., addressing both economic and environmental priorities. The work will lead to 3,000 jobs in rural B.C. while rehabilitating and restoring forests damaged by disease and wildfire. The payment is in addition to $85 million the society received from government when it was created in 2015.

The Rural Dividend encourages partnerships that offer far-reaching benefits. On North Vancouver Island, the Regional District of Mount Waddington is leading a marketing project involving business and community partners that aims to attract, train and retain skilled forest sector employees. The North Island Forest Industry Attraction, Training and Retention Strategy received $500,000 through the Rural Dividend for the project to help stabilize and grow the region’s population.

Innovation was identified as a key area of opportunity in the Competitiveness Agenda for British Columbia’s Forest Sector. In February 2017, the B.C. and Canadian governments announced a joint investment of $4.5 million for the University of Northern British Columbia to build a Wood Innovation Research Lab adjacent to the Wood Innovation and Design Centre in Prince George.

The Ministry of Forests, Land and Natural Resource Operations has more than 1,500 employees working in rural B.C., including senior executives in Smithers and Armstrong.

Through community forest agreements, government has a goal of diversifying the forest economy to benefit rural communities. Valemount Community Forest Company Ltd., owned by the Village of Valemount, is taking steps to create more value and more jobs from every metre of wood harvested, and to turn a 240-acre abandoned mill site into a thriving centre of economic activity.
14 Build on B.C.’s advantages in mining and energy

B.C. is internationally recognized as a centre of expertise in mining and geoscience, and it is home to the world’s largest concentration of exploration companies and mining professionals. Mining and oil and gas remain critical economic drivers in B.C., providing thousands of rural jobs. Government continues to explore ways to make these industries competitive and achieve the highest value for resources to maximize employment and business opportunities.

Government commitments

14.1 Invest $550,000 in new project funding through the Community Energy Leadership Program to stimulate economic activity in rural communities while reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing energy efficiency.

14.2 Offer $120 million a year in 2017 and 2018 in royalty deductions through the Infrastructure Royalty Credit Program for new and upgraded roads and pipelines to support natural gas and oil development in northeast B.C.

14.3 Continue providing B.C.’s royalty programs to ensure B.C.’s natural gas is the most competitive in North America.

14.4 Allocate a further $18 million over three years to support mine permitting and related compliance and enforcement activities.

14.5 Maintain the New Mine Allowance through to 2020 for new mines and major expansions, supporting a competitive mining and exploration sector.

14.6 Continue the Mining Customer Payment Plan, allowing customers who are eligible to defer payment of a portion of electricity costs for a mine when the price of copper or coal falls below a benchmark.

14.7 Invest $10 million over two years through Geoscience BC, starting in 2017-18, to further support work in encouraging mineral, coal, and oil and gas exploration investment in the province.

14.8 Continue to support mineral exploration in 2017-18 through the mining exploration tax credit and mining flow-through share tax credit, at an estimated cost of $52 million.
B.C.’s natural gas industry contributes more than $5 billion in investment every year and employs 15,000 workers, most of them in rural areas in northeast B.C.

The Province delivers the Infrastructure Royalty Credit Program to develop new and upgraded roads and pipelines for natural gas and oil development. Since 2004, 1,350 kilometres of new and upgraded roads and 2,430 kilometres of new upstream pipeline have been built.

The construction of BC Hydro’s Site C Clean Energy project will contribute $3.2 billion to the provincial GDP, including $130 million in rural communities across the northeast. It is expected that up to 80% of all employment opportunities to deliver the project will be for British Columbians.

BC Hydro is supporting agricultural production and agrifood economic activity in the Peace region through a $20-million agricultural compensation fund. The fund is being developed with input from agricultural and other stakeholders as part of the Agricultural Mitigation and Compensation Plan to mitigate the effects of the Site C Clean Energy project on agriculture in the Peace region.

The Community Energy Leadership Program supports local government and Aboriginal investments in energy efficiency and clean energy projects. The program reduces greenhouse gas emissions and increases energy efficiency while stimulating economic activity and creating across the province.

Seven new mines have been permitted in B.C. since 2011 creating more than 2,000 new jobs, and nine major expansions have been approved. B.C.’s mining industry employs more than 30,000 workers with an average annual salary of $113,000.
Delivering on the Rural Strategy

The Rural Economic Development Strategy represents a unified government commitment to rural B.C. It is the delivery on a promise to rural British Columbians to make sure they realize the benefits B.C. has earned as Canada’s leader in economic growth and job creation. British Columbia benefits when all of its regions are economically strong, and this is especially true for rural B.C. given its key role in building the province’s prosperity.

The strategy builds on the many programs that have been put in place to reinvigorate and diversify rural B.C. communities, and it identifies new ways government can work with rural stakeholders and partners to grow rural economies and create new jobs. The strategy will continue to evolve over time so rural B.C. can seize new opportunities and respond to emerging challenges.

List of B.C. Government Strategies and Initiatives

Rural economic development is a key initiative for the government. The following strategies and initiatives will be significant in the rollout and delivery of the Rural Economic Development Strategy.

BC Jobs Plan
The BC Jobs Plan created an economic strategy to position B.C. for long-term economic success. With a renewed focus on creating jobs in rural communities, the Jobs Plan aims to ensure the competitiveness of rural centres in a rapidly changing global economy.

B.C. on the Move
B.C. on the Move is a 10-year transportation plan that outlines critical investments and improvements throughout the province that will improve the daily lives of British Columbians. Transportation is key to moving goods and services around the province, especially when it comes to keeping things moving in rural communities.

B.C.’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint
A key goal of B.C.’s Skills for Jobs Blueprint is to make sure that British Columbians have a seamless plan that takes them from high school through post-secondary education and right into the workforce. It seeks to support those who are struggling to gain a foothold in the job market or who face unique challenges, such as youth at risk, persons with disabilities and Aboriginal youth.

Trails Strategy for British Columbia
The Trails Strategy for British Columbia provides the framework, principles, and guidance necessary to develop a world-class trails system for the province. It establishes clear strategic direction for planning, developing, maintaining, managing, marketing and using an integrated network of trails. B.C.’s rural communities are surrounded by extensive public lands and with exhaustive networks of exceptional trails used, valued and cared for by local communities.
B.C.’s Climate Leadership Plan
B.C.’s Climate Leadership Plan highlights the next set of actions government is taking to help meet the 2050 emissions reduction target of 80% below 2007 levels, while building a clean economy, including the creation of up to 66,000 jobs over the next 10 years.

B.C. Agrifood and Seafood Strategic Growth Plan
The B.C. agri-food and seafood sector is an important job creator and an integral part of the provincial economy. The sector has a first-class reputation around the world for providing innovative and high-quality products, and the plan ensures that B.C. support for the sector continues. Agri-food and seafood production is important to rural communities and the strategies in the plan are key to creating and maintaining sector jobs, encouraging innovation and supporting new opportunities.

#BCTECH Strategy
The tech sector supports businesses throughout the province, from mining to movies. Technology is essential to business today, so the stronger the sector is, the more competitive business becomes. The #BCTECH Strategy is crucial to economic diversification of natural resource communities, and important to attracting and retaining young adults to rural communities.

B.C.’s Tourism Strategy
The B.C. Tourism Strategy supports the BC Jobs Plan commitment to grow tourism revenues and jobs, and showcases the important role tourism plays in local and provincial economies. Significant to the tourism sector is highlighting B.C.’s spectacular natural beauty, and nowhere can this be shown better than in B.C.’s rural communities.

A Competitiveness Agenda for British Columbia’s Forest Sector
The Competitiveness Agenda sets the stage to improve B.C.’s competitive position, maximize the value derived from B.C.’s forests, and tap into innovation. There are three subsector plans as part of the Agenda:

- The Value Added Sector Action Plan recognizes that a significant number of value-added businesses are in smaller communities throughout B.C. The plan developed with value-added stakeholders contains six recommendations for action.
- B.C. Pulp and Paper Sector Sustainability: Sector Challenges and Future Opportunities contains recommendations in three key areas designed to support the sector’s revitalization and transformation.
- The Forest Fibre Action Plan focuses on increasing efficient utilization of lower-quality wood and increased access to wood residue for secondary users, including the wood bioenergy sector and other non-lumber manufacturers, such as pulp and paper and oriented strandboard.

BC Small Business Accord
The BC Small Business Accord ensures government is doing all it can to support small business through a commitment to improve interactions with small business and to ensure government initiatives and services consider their needs. It will evolve and change to meet the ongoing needs and interests of the small business community.

Raising our Game in Asia: BC Jobs Plan Trade Strategy
B.C. is moving to strengthen and diversify trade in Asian markets in order to grow B.C.’s economy. Through a new Asia trade strategy, the province will open trade and investment representative offices in Southeast Asia, develop a new strategy for India and expand its activities in mid-size Chinese cities. Through the creation of diverse and strong trade networks, rural B.C. businesses can rely on healthy export avenues to support job creation and economic growth.
Members of the Rural Advisory Council

**Debra Arnott, Cache Creek** is general manager of Community Futures Sun Country and has co-owned and operated a logging company with her husband for the last nine years. She has experience working with local government and has a strong passion for enhancing economic development in rural communities.

**Susan Clovechok, Fairmont Hot Springs** is executive director of the Columbia Valley Chamber of Commerce. With more than 25 years in business, she has a wide range of experience in sales, customer service, and quality and operational management. She wants rural communities to be economically diverse and sustainable, while providing residents the lifestyle that attracted them to their chosen community in the first place.

**Geri Collins, Kamloops** is director of operations for the Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations. She and her husband owned and operated a successful construction business and also raise cattle as a family venture. Geri has been a member of the Southern Interior Beetle Action Coalition since its inception and is a member of the Tkemłup’s te Secwépemc (Kamloops) Band.

**Tom Hoffman, Williams Lake** is a registered professional forester and a board member of Community Futures Cariboo-Chilcotin and the Northern Development Initiative Trust. He believes that rural B.C. has a long and proud tradition in resource development, including innovation to expand economic benefits.

**Bill Holmberg, Houston** has more than 20 years of experience in business, and is currently a manager of a heavy-duty equipment business in Houston. Having spent two terms as the mayor of Houston, he is able to bring a local government perspective to the committee.

**Chief Roy Jones Jr., Skidegate** is a commercial fisherman and has interacted with almost all of B.C.’s coastal communities. He has been on the Native Brotherhood of B.C. general executive for 23 years. A hereditary chief on the Council of the Haida Nation, he spends his time encouraging young adults to continue their education and pursue business opportunities.

**Sue Kenny, Dawson Creek** is the general manager of Community Futures Peace Liard and executive director of the Northeast Regional Community Foundation. Living in northern B.C. makes her well aware of the challenges that are faced by rural communities.

As a former city councillor in Dawson Creek, she has had an opportunity to build relationships with businesses and stakeholders alike.

**Jonathan Lok, Port McNeill** is a registered forest technician and a managing partner in a consulting firm. He has more than 20 years of experience in the forest sector. He brings his experience in facilitation, project management, communications and leadership to the Rural Advisory Council.

**Grace McGregor, Christina Lake** was previously the owner of a small business and is now chair of the Regional District of Kootenay Boundary, vice-chair of the Southern Interior Beetle Action Coalition and engaged in many other community organizations. Her keen interest in rural B.C. began seven years ago when she attended the Reversing the Tide Conference in Prince George. Following subsequent meetings, McGregor and others put together a paper entitled What rural B.C. needs to survive.

**Chris Pieper, Armstrong** is mayor and has more than 20 years in local government. Previously, he worked in the forest sector and as a consultant. He believes strongly in the value of rural communities and feels that support and opportunities must be enhanced to allow for maximum growth.

**Sylvia Pranger, Agassiz** has local government experience as mayor and as a councillor. She is an active volunteer in her community and appreciates the contributions that rural communities make to B.C. She wants to be a voice at the table to make sure that rural issues are heard.

**Gerry Thiessen, Vanderhoof** is mayor of the district municipality, vice-chair of the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako and vice-chair of the Omineca Beetle Action Coalition. He also owned a cattle operation. His vision for rural B.C. is to make sure the residents are healthy and educated and stay in their community to make it economically sustainable.

**Eric (Rick) Thompson, McBride** is a retired district administrator for School District 57 and a former school principal. He is currently the successful owner/operator of three small businesses in McBride. He has vast experience working in education and regional government. Having seen success with small businesses in a rural setting, he is sure that the Council will be able to increase those opportunities in other communities.