

# Rural Initiative – Draft Guidance

BC Public Service

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# Context

22% of British Columbia's population (about 1 million people) live in a rural, remote or First Nation community in British Columbia. This area covers approximately 98% of the province's land mass. It is estimated that rural areas contribute \$84B annually to British Columbia's economy. Much of British Columbia's primary industry – including forestry, mining, energy, agriculture and seafood – is concentrated in rural communities with these industries generating a large share of resource-related revenue for the provincial government.

While rural areas contribute significantly to British Columbia's economy, rural communities experience distinct challenges in comparison to urban centres due to their smaller population sizes, remoteness, distance from services, and reliance on primary industries for employment. This contributes to challenges with accessing services, transportation, infrastructure, workforce development, and maintaining a local tax base. In recent years, these challenges have been further complicated by shifts in traditional resource sectors such as forestry, mounting pressure on public services, and economic and social disruption caused by disaster events such as floods and fires. At the same time, small communities are being called upon to respond to increasingly complex issues – often with less capacity and resources than those in larger centres.

Despite these challenges, rural areas remain an essential driver of British Columbia's economy. Rural British Columbia is full of strong, resilient and self-reliant communities who are charting new paths in the face of these challenges.

Making sure that rural British Columbians have access to high quality, reliable public services and continue to see the benefits of a growing economy requires Government to be intentional in assessing the **impact of provincial policy on rural areas** and the **potential for rural areas to help shape provincial policy**.

# Background

In 2023, the Province released [StrongerBC: Good Lives in Strong Communities](#) which outlined a new vision to help build a better future for rural communities and the people who call them home. This included a commitment to apply a rural lens in decision-making to ensure that rural realities are considered across government initiatives.

In 2025, the Premier set out mandates to ensure Government considers the realities and contributions of rural communities in its decision-making:

- Minister of Jobs and Economic Growth mandated to ensure government initiatives consider and deliver economic growth and benefits to rural communities.
- Minister of State for Local Government and Rural Communities mandated to work with rural and remote communities, regional districts, municipalities and First Nations to identify the unique needs and opportunities these smaller communities need to grow and thrive.

# Purpose

All Ministries have a responsibility to design policy, programs and services that are responsive to the diverse needs and constraints of rural communities and residents. The *Draft Guidance* sets out specific guidance for the BC Public Service to consider the realities of rural areas when updating or developing legislation, policies or programs.

This *Draft Guidance* includes a set of easy-to-apply tools that enable a more consistent and credible approach for assessing how a proposed policy measure may impact – positively or negatively – on rural areas. The use of these tools – sometimes referred to as a *rural lens* or *rural proofing* – is a **process** whereby Ministries explore, analyse and incorporate rural considerations in policy development and decision making.

The use of these tools aims to better position Ministries to articulate impacts and propose mitigation measures as items come forward for decision by Government. While Ministries may already work with rural communities or stakeholders and/or account for impacts on rural areas as part of decision-making processes, the Draft Guidance seeks to bring greater clarity and consistency to these approaches throughout government.

With these tools, Government aims to:

- Identify impacts of a proposed policy measure on rural areas,
- Improve the accessibility of government services in rural areas through more inclusive and responsive program and service design,

- Improve understanding about rural realities and needs within the BC Public Service, and
- Improve relationships with rural communities and stakeholders through more inclusive approaches to policy and program design.

Government will continue to engage with rural communities, rural interest holders, and First Nations on the approaches described in this document. It is expected that Government's approach will evolve through implementation, engagement, and ongoing evaluation. Importantly, the *Draft Guidance* is meant to complement, not replace, consultation obligations established through the [Community Charter](#) and the [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#).

# Defining Rural

There is no single definition of 'rural' within government. In certain cases, Ministries define rural based on population size whereas others define rural based on the distance between a small community and a larger population centre. While there are often valid reasons for their use, differing definitions can create unpredictability for rural communities and residents who may be considered 'rural' for one program and not the other. Additionally, differing definitions can make it more difficult to directly compare programs and assess the impact of a particular initiative on rural areas.

The *Draft Guidance* introduces a new and more consistent method for defining 'rural' by combining two attributes of rurality (population and remoteness) and place-based considerations such as primary modes of inter-community transportation (ferry- or boat-access only and Electoral Areas). The result of this multi-attribute definition is the *Rural Matrix* that includes three levels of rurality and three levels of urbanity. This tool aims to provide analysts and decision makers with a dynamic, evidence-based, and defensible definition of 'rural' that can be used and adapted for different purposes.

The image below illustrates the *Rural Matrix*.

<b>Population</b>	150,000 +				Urban 1	Urban 1
	50,000 - 149,999		Urban 2	Urban 2	Urban 2	Urban 1
	25,000 - 49,999		Urban 2	Urban 2	Urban 2	Urban 1
	10,000 - 24,999	Rural 3	Rural 3	Rural 3	Rural 3	Urban 1
	5,000 - 9,999	Rural 2	Rural 2	Rural 3	Rural 3	Urban 3
	1,000 - 4,999	Rural 1	Rural 2	Rural 2	Rural 3	Urban 3
	0 - 999 + Electoral Areas	Rural 1	Rural 1	Rural 2	Rural 3	Urban 3
<b>Rural Definition Matrix</b>		Very Remote >0.5532	Remote 0.3899 - 0.5532	Less Accessible 0.2889 - 0.3898	Accessible 0.1500 - 0.2888	Easily Accessible <0.1500
		<b>Index of Remoteness</b>				

This definition can be applied in different ways depending on the context: in program design it could be used to define levels of eligibility criteria; in policy design, the definition can be used to make exemptions or special allowances for smaller and more remote communities, and; in legislation, the definition could be used to estimate the impact of a policy change on rural residents.

It is important to note that the *Rural Matrix* only categorises for non-First Nation communities. As described in the next section, it is recommended that Ministries assess the specific needs of First Nations through a process of consultation and cooperation in recognition that there may be additional factors beyond population, remoteness, and transportation that should be considered in policy and program design.

More information, including a full list of communities and their associated level of rurality, is available in the Rural Matrix microsite page.

## Indigenous Peoples

93% of First Nation communities in British Columbia are located in rural areas with traditional territories covering almost all the land base that is today described as rural. While First Nations may experience similar challenges to non-First Nation communities in rural areas such as service access, infrastructure, transportation and workforce capacity, they may experience additional, unique barriers due to the cumulative effects of colonialism and ongoing systemic discrimination. As a result, these challenges need to be seen in a distinct

legal, political and historical context and must be approached in a way that recognises the unique relationship between the Province and First Nations as expressed by the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* ('the Declaration Act') and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* ('UN Declaration'). Ministries can use the *Draft Guidance* to consider the impacts of a proposed policy measure on both First Nations and non-First Nation communities in rural areas.

The *Draft Guidance* should be seen as distinct, but complementary, to analysis that Ministries may undertake to understand the impact of a particular measure on Indigenous Peoples per their obligations in the Declaration Act. This includes written guidance for discharging obligations under Section 3 of the Declaration Act such as the [Interim Approach to Implementing the Requirements of Section 3 of the Declaration Act](#), Consultation and Cooperation Guidance and any additional related resources for guidance on Indigenous-specific considerations.

## Rural Impact Assessment

### Overview

At the core of the *Draft Guidance* is an analytical process to ensure that the specific needs of and impacts on rural areas are considered when ministries are updating or developing legislation, policy or programs. The aim of these processes is to make policy and programs more inclusive of and responsive to rural communities and residents by avoiding a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and by considering the unique

dynamics of community development in a rural context. Importantly, these processes should account for both the ***impact of government policies on rural areas*** and the ***potential of rural areas to contribute to government policies***.

As a tool, the Rural Impact Assessment can be used to assess how policies, programs or initiatives may affect rural communities or residents in different ways than communities or residents in larger urban centres. It is designed to ensure that rural realities are considered early and consistently in the development and implementation of proposed policy measures.

This may include, as examples, consideration of:

- Demographics (e.g. older population)
- Service Accessibility (e.g. travel distances)
- Connectivity (e.g. digital services)
- Service Delivery Models (e.g. per capital costs)
- Economic Characteristics (e.g. seasonality or sectoral dependence of employment)
- Housing and Infrastructure (e.g. infrastructure costs)
- Environment (e.g. vulnerability to climate change)
- Community Characteristics (e.g. volunteerism)

The Rural Impact Assessment includes a set of guiding questions or criteria that help identify potential impacts (positive, negative or unintended), barriers to access, and/or opportunities for rural participation and innovation. By applying the Rural Impact Assessment during the planning and review stages of policy development, analysts and decision makers can better align their strategies with the diverse needs, capacities and

aspirations of rural communities. The Rural Impact Assessment can also help Ministries understand and recognize how rural areas can contribute to the achievement of Government priorities.

## How to Apply It

While not a requirement for Cabinet or Treasury Board Submissions, Ministries can proactively take steps to assess how a proposed policy measure may impact – positively or negatively – rural areas. Ministries should be able to clearly articulate how a policy choice may impact rural areas and any measures taken in policy or program design to mitigate these impacts as well as how rural communities can contribute to the initiative.

At each of stage of the policy development process, analysts and decision makers can contemplate questions like:

- Who was involved with determining what the problem is?
- How is rural being defined?
- What rural-specific data is available and is it reliable for use in analysis?
- Why is this data being chosen, and what gaps exist in these data?
- How are options being assessed and adjusted for rural areas?
- Does the recommended option address realistic eligibility/participation requirements, service delivery models, and/or project or reporting requirements for rural areas?
- To what extent did engagement with rural communities or stakeholders reveal a preferred policy option?

- To what extent will the policy option improve the quality of life for rural residents?
- What rural-specific factors have been identified that would affect the delivery of a program, policy or service in rural areas?
- How are rural indicators being developed and set to monitor policy implementation?
- Does evaluation include both outcomes and process indicators? Who is involved in setting these?

To assist with this analysis, Ministries can refer to specific tools such as the Rural Matrix Guide, the Rural Impact Assessment and the Rural Policy Guidebook. These documents provide analysts with more detail on the specific steps that can be followed throughout the policy development process to better assess the impact of a proposed policy measure on rural areas.

## When to Apply It

Ministries are encouraged to complete a Rural Impact Assessment when developing:

- new policy proposals,
- strategies or action plans,
- significant changes to service delivery models,
- reviews of existing policies, initiatives, or programs, and
- legislative proposals.

# Engaging Rural Communities

Engagement with rural communities and stakeholders is essential to ensure that policy and program design accurately reflects rural perspectives and to avoid unintended fallout from government policy in rural areas. Further, regular engagement with rural communities can help improve relationships by offering more opportunities for rural communities to contribute to policy that may affect them.

Effective engagement with rural communities benefits from a deliberate approach that balances scale, accessibility, and method. While in-person engagement remains the standard for building trust-based relationships and creating a common understanding on issues, logistical and financial constraints—especially in remote areas—can limit its feasibility. To overcome these barriers, hybrid models that combine online methods with local, in-person participation offer a scalable and inclusive alternative.

A multi-method engagement strategy can support Ministries to reach diverse audiences across rural and urban areas. Ministries should consider a combination of in-person, virtual and hybrid sessions where time and capacity allow. In certain cases, partnering with local associations, community groups, faith groups, and trusted intermediaries can enhance outreach efforts and establish credibility in the engagement process.

As referenced in prior sections, the *Draft Guidance* does not replace established processes

for consulting with Local Governments or First Nation Governments.

When engaging with Municipalities or Regional Districts, Ministries should refer to the [Principles of Provincial-Local Government Relations](#).

When engaging with Indigenous Peoples, Ministries should refer to the [Interim Approach to Implement the Requirements of Section 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#). Section 3 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* requires that the Province “in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous Peoples” take “all measures necessary” to ensure consistency between the laws of British Columbia and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

## Rural Initiative Resources

To support access to an evolving set of tools, resources and data, an [Intranet microsite](#) has been set up which includes:

- [Rural Matrix](#) – a made-in-BC rural definition that categorises communities based on population, remoteness, and certain place-based considerations.
- [Rural Impact Assessment](#) – a tool that supports analysts to identify potential impacts on rural areas when developing or updating legislation, policy or programs.
- [Rural Data and Data Guide](#) – a list of links to existing source of community level data in BC and a step-by-step resource for locating, interpreting and applying

rural-relevant data to policy and program design.

- [Case Studies](#) - real government examples of how program areas have incorporated rural considerations and their resulting adaptations.

## Contact the Rural Initiatives Team

The Rural Initiatives Team within the Ministry of Jobs and Economic Growth is responsible for the *Draft Guidance* and enhancing the capability of the BC Public Service to make effective use of the tools described in this document. Upon request, this team is available to assist Ministries with locating rural-specific research, data and resources and providing general guidance and support for the use of the *Draft Guidance*.

Ministries are encouraged to engage directly with the team at [RuralPolicy@gov.bc.ca](mailto:RuralPolicy@gov.bc.ca).



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