

BC's Approach to Rural and Regional Economic Development

By Andrea Collins

Rural British Columbia shares similarities and differences with rural Alberta, but many of the programs, policies, strategies, tactics and tools that are effective can be applied to both provinces. Greg Goodwin, Executive Director, Strategic Initiatives, BC Regional Economic and Skills Development gave delegates to ARDN's April 2011 conference a look at what his province has done to support rural development and resiliency.

Greg described the economic environment in BC as shifting from natural resources to goods producing, and the markets as shifting from predominantly US to emerging markets such as China, India and Brazil. BC's economy is traditionally based on forestry and forest products, which means that rural areas account for 61% of economic activity in the province with only 39% based in metro areas (though 70% of the population live there). However, forestry is experiencing a historic low and the devastation from the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic, so alternative, more diversified businesses are needed to keep rural BC alive.

The challenges identified include:

- Lack of diversity in rural economics
- High unemployment in some areas
- Out migration and adjacent loss of skilled labour
- Difficulty in retaining small rural businesses
- Lack of local capacity
- Uncertainty in land tenure (competing interests around land base)

To counter these challenges, Greg and his team looked at ways to keep people and businesses in rural communities, give communities a voice, build infrastructure and foster competitiveness. Three entities were formed to achieve these objectives: Rural BC Secretariat, Community Development Trust and Beetle Action Coalition. Partnerships, innovation and strong communication are considered essential to all three and need the combined expertise and effort of community leaders, government leaders and university leaders/researchers. Any research report commissioned is required to include specific recommendations that address the benefits to the community or region.

Various methods have been used to reach out, educate and connect people who need to be involved. They include webinars, a rural BC website and research projects funded by the Knowledge Mobilization Project. With tourism, trade and investment of growing importance in BC, Greg's department is ensuring that rural regions will be knowledgeable, prepared and part of emerging opportunities for economic growth.