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SOUND OFF

Regional Rural Youth Dialogue on Employment, Education and Communication

RURAL DIALOGUE SUMMARY REPORT

Vernon, British Columbia January 14, 2006

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For further information on the Rural Dialogue, please call 1-888-781-2222 (toll-free number).

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1. FOREWORD

This report is a summary of discussions that took place at the *Sound Off* Regional Rural Youth Dialogue on Employment, Education and Communication, held in Vernon, British Columbia, on January 14, 2006. No limits were placed on the participants during discussions that took place. In order to present a true report of the free-ranging discussions, recommendations made by participants that fall outside federal jurisdiction are also included. Views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Canada.

2. INTRODUCTION

This event was part of the Rural Dialogue, an ongoing, two-way discussion between the Government of Canada and Canadians from rural, remote and northern regions. Launched in 1998, the Rural Dialogue is a key citizen-engagement component of the Canadian Rural Partnership (CRP). The CRP is designed to support a horizontal approach to rural development within the Government of Canada that responds to rural, remote and northern priorities. The Dialogue process helps the Government of Canada to understand local and regional priorities, and provides rural, remote and northern citizens with an opportunity to influence government policies, programs and services that affect them.

Participants (fourteen (14) in attendance, eleven (11) of which were young people between 18 and 29 years old) included: representatives of regional rural and youth organizations; academics; community, economic, and social development officers; and members of the federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments which includes two members of Rural Team-British Columbia (RT-BC).

The *Sound Off* Regional Rural Youth Dialogue built on the model and success of the *Get Heard* Regional Youth Dialogue held in Castlegar, BC in November 2005. Both of these dialogues were organized in partnership with the BC Rural Network (BCRN). This Network was formed in 2004 to link organizations in rural BC and help develop responses to rural and remote community issues. It is the goal of the BCRN to dialogue and share information with rural communities, governments and organizations across BC through a series of regional forums and through the development of a Web site, newsletter and listserv. The current Working Group is made up of people from rural organizations across BC that represent regions and rural interest groups such as youth, seniors, women, First Nations, and community economic development organizations, and the agriculture sector.

In 2000, eight (8) Rural Youth Dialogue (RYD) discussion sessions were organized across BC, involving approximately 250 young rural participants. The purpose of the RYD was to identify key challenges and opportunities for

rural youth in BC. The need for relevant educational opportunities, diversified jobs and government programs for rural youth were common issues across the province, with jobs and education being the top two priorities.

These sessions provided the Government of Canada with valuable insight, which will aid in the formulation of improved individual and cooperative initiatives to assist youth in addressing labour market and social development issues. Key recommendations from the RYD included:

- reporting outcomes back to the youth;
- developing a communications strategy;
- dialoguing with youth on a continual basis;
- developing local contacts with youth-focussed groups; and
- ensuring that community needs were considered in action delivery.

The objectives of the *Sound Off* Regional Rural Youth Dialogue on Employment, Education and Communication - building on some of the above recommendations - were as follows:

- to provide youth with information on education, job programs and skills training available in the region;
- to offer a networking opportunity to youth; and
- to solicit the input of youth and people who work with youth concerning the development of a youth communication strategy for the BCRN.

Additionally, the youth participants were given an opportunity to provide their input on themes for a youth workshop being organized as part of a provincial joint conference to be held in April 2006.

The results presented will help guide the future actions of the Government of Canada in support of rural communities and will contribute to the ongoing development of the proposed National Rural Framework (NRF). The overarching goal of the proposed NRF, a framework to facilitate federal, provincial and territorial collaboration on rural issues, is to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of rural communities by creating an environment in which communities and citizens have access to improved social and economic opportunities.

The proposed NRF is based on five areas of focus that affect community sustainability. The issues and priorities discussed at this event are presented under the relevant areas ([section 4](#) of this report).

3. THE NATIONAL RURAL FRAMEWORK'S (NRF) FIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

Sustainable Livelihoods

Factors affecting how Canadians can provide for themselves and their families to live in rural communities that are economically and socially healthy.

Environmental Stewardship

Ways in which rural and urban communities can share with governments the responsibility for good management, the benefits of natural resources and a healthy environment.

Innovative Approaches to Rural Infrastructure

Approaches allowing communities, working together with governments, to develop and maintain physical, social and knowledge-based infrastructure that addresses their needs.

Engaged Populations and Institutions

Opportunities for institutions and governments to provide the environment where Canadians can actively participate in making decisions that affect the community.

Demographic Adaptation

Openness to the range of options rural communities may need to consider in order to adapt to ongoing changes in population, economics and services.

4. ISSUES RELATING TO THE NRF'S AREAS OF FOCUS

The issues and priorities discussed at this event related to the following areas of focus: Sustainable Livelihoods; Innovative Approaches to Rural Infrastructure; and Engaged Populations and Institutions. Proposed actions and solutions that could address the issues discussed are also included in this section.

4.1 Sustainable Livelihoods

The 2000 RYD found that issues related to sustainable livelihoods (e.g., employment and entrepreneurial activity) were ranked as top priorities by BC youth. *Sound Off* was organized to start addressing these issues and to begin the work on community supported actions.

4.1.1 Employment

Youth participants spoke to the lack of employment opportunities available to them in their communities; while employers and job councillors spoke of a current labour shortage caused by the large aging demographic. Through discussions it became clear that while jobs were available, youth did not have the prerequisites or skills required to fill the available positions. A related barrier is that many employers are seemingly not willing to invest in training programs.

Another barrier to employment, as identified by the employment counsellors in attendance, was the negative perceptions that youth held about jobs in the trades. An invited speaker from Futures BC sought to dispel these myths through education. Such myths, as identified by the youth participants, included: jobs in the trades are for lazy individuals or for people

who are not smart enough for university; they are low paying; there is no future in the trades.

The youth indicated that information related to rural job markets, with attention to prerequisites (e.g. education, physical strength and endurance, drivers licence, car), is needed. Although this information is available online, it is not centralized. Youth agreed that regional youth dialogues that bring together employers and youth was the most effective way of disseminating the information to interested youth.

- The Rural Secretariat and RT-BC should continue to support and organize regional youth dialogues that include an "employment" component.

4.2 Innovative Approaches to Rural Infrastructure

4.2.1 Social Infrastructure

Accessing the numerous educational opportunities available to urban residents can be a challenge for rural citizens. It was noted that access is often the first barrier to moving forward with ones' education. The delegates of *Sound Off* discussed alternative education options ranging from high school and equivalent certificates to college and university level courses that could be completed online, by mail or at local institutions.

Participants also indicated that provincially there was no established infrastructure (social or technological) connecting youth organizations. This lack of communication has many groups reinventing the wheel. Attendees expressed that a communication strategy for BC rural youth is central to initiating and coordinating smart approaches to new, efficient and more effective means of communication. The BCRN is committed to collaborating on the development of a communication strategy for BC rural youth.

- The Rural Secretariat, through RT-BC, should continue to assist the BCRN. For instance, by supporting jointly organized rural youth dialogues and by developing a rural youth communication strategy. RT-BC should facilitate access to their networks, offer in-kind support (e.g. time), provide financial support for events that build rural youth capacity and actively promote the BCRN Web site.

A communication strategy designed and maintained by youth for youth (with support from the BCRN) is an innovative, multi-purpose, forward-looking initiative that supports social infrastructure such as education and learning, while building community and fostering a rural youth culture. During the event, participants provided the following feedback and insights to the BCRN as to what this strategy should include:

1. a simple Web site with a message board that is easy to load when using a dial-up Internet connection;
2. increased distribution of existing rural youth zines;⁽¹⁾
3. ongoing regional and provincial dialogues; and
4. the recruitment of two youth to sit on the BCRN Board of Directors.

4.2.2 Knowledge-based Infrastructure

A communications strategy designed by youth for youth supports access to communication and information technology infrastructure. Through this technology, rural youth involved in the project could have the opportunity to

gain employable skills such as Web: maintenance, design, and content writing. These transferable skills can also be used to support other community projects.

The youth indicated that the proposed Web site and newsletter - sustainable technological infrastructure projects - must have on-the-ground support from rural citizens to provide them with effective means of accessing information and of getting their voices heard.

4.3 Engaged Populations and Institutions

4.3.1 Collaborative Relationships

Community groups should partner and work together on issues of youth participation in order to foster a youth culture that values engagement. Youth are by no means identical and should not be treated as such. For example, targeting only the schools excludes the majority of individuals who fall under that commonly used definition of youth (13 to 30 years of age). To most effectively target and engage the greatest number of youth, strong partnerships should be established and maintained between diverse community service providers.

Diverse and meaningful networking opportunities can also be created through collaborative partnerships with citizens, organizations (e.g. community, youth, regional, provincial and federal), and federal and provincial governments (e.g. the Rural Secretariat and RT-BC members). The *Sound Off* dialogue was made possible through such partnerships.

- The Rural Secretariat, through RT-BC, should continue to actively engage in collaborative relationships with various organizations to support networking in rural communities.

Partnering with established community organizations ensured that the organizing groups (RT-BC and BCRN) had a voice on the ground within communities and a direct link to community networks and resources. It also ensured that the dialogue catered to local needs. The *Sound Off* dialogue sought not only to solicit input from rural youth, but also to be proactive and provide youth relevant resources. While rural communities have a multitude of resources, access is often a challenge.

4.3.2 Decision-Making and Accountability

Youth participants indicated that their voices were often marginalized or silenced in their communities. They spoke of the benefits and importance of having youth represented on boards and committees at the local, regional, provincial and national levels.

4.3.3 Leadership Development

Creating opportunities for youth to network and to develop leadership skills empowers youth. Such opportunities encourage youth participation in leadership activities within communities. To this end, rural youth dialogues should continue to be supported and organized as these events provide valuable opportunities to youth.

Youth in rural and remote communities have limited access to youth leadership building activities as sessions and conferences are usually organized in large urban centers. Additionally, small communities often lack

the capacity and population to organize such events. The result is that youth from rural, remote and northern communities miss out on opportunities to develop skills and collect "résumé worthy" experiences. Participation in regional rural youth dialogues should be recognized as leadership building exercises.

- The Rural Secretariat / RT-BC should provide certificates of appreciation to youth as a concrete way of expressing sincere thanks and recognizing youth involvement and participation in youth dialogues. Youth could then attach these certificates to their résumés.

4.3.4 Citizen Engagement

The topic of youth engagement resonated throughout the dialogue, particularly surrounding the question "how do we get more youth engaged?" Discussions on how to increase youth involvement in a meaningful and democratic way were framed with the understanding that any initiative seeking to engage youth must start at the grass-roots level. As one participant noted, this is the only way to ensure sustainability and legitimacy.

The BC Rural Youth Network, established three years ago, recently lost its funding and momentum. The members of the Network accomplished a great deal in their own communities but lacked the resources to maintain effective regional and provincial communication. The participants were eager to see the revitalization of a sustainable provincial rural youth network.

More focussed and in-depth discussions on the issue led participants to agree that starting small (locally) was the best strategy for ensuring effectiveness and sustainability. Establishing and strengthening regional rural youth networks is the first step to building a provincial youth network. Starting small is more cost effective, time effective and manageable. Participants further agreed that starting at the regional level is the only sustainable way to build a BC Rural Youth Network.

- The Rural Secretariat, through RT-BC, can best support rural youth engagement by continuing to support regional youth dialogues and the establishment of regional rural youth networks.

There was consensus among participants that youth dialogues are the most effective way of fostering youth engagement. While recognizing the importance of events that target youth specific issues to solicit youth opinion, participants expressed that separating youth and adults is contrary to the goal of youth engagement. If the goal is to engage youth and give youth an active voice in their communities, then it is essential that youth and non-youth be brought to the same table. This involves educating and sensitizing non-youth on the realities of the power dynamic that exists between both groups.

- The Rural Secretariat, through RT-BC, should continue to work with its partners to support youth participation and engagement in a meaningful way.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The *Sound Off* Regional Rural Youth Dialogue on Employment, Education and Communication was a success. The evaluation of the event demonstrated that participants were overall, very satisfied with the

experience. The majority of participants also noted that they were very satisfied or satisfied with the organization, agenda, topics for discussion, panellists, and outcomes of the event.

Youth participants were also asked if the event had helped build the rural youth voice. A few indicated that more youth should have been involved in the event to increase their voice. However, they noted that the event was a first step that was worthwhile and that it provided an opportunity to make new contacts. Participants noted that contributing to discussions on rural youth issues created a sense of empowerment among the youth participants. Another commended the RT-BC's efforts and actions in becoming more youth focussed and friendly.

A number of important issues were raised and priorities identified during the event. The following are the key ones:

- a sustainable local youth network is lacking in Vernon and in other communities across BC;
- it is only once local youth networks are established that work can begin on establishing regional networks and eventually provincial networks;
- youth lack support for rural youth-focussed community capacity building initiatives (leadership events, entrepreneurial enterprises, seats on committees) at the local, regional, provincial and national level;
- youth initiatives must be developed and maintained by youth for youth, but require the support of established organizations, both financially and also in the form of mentorship; and
- a communication strategy is needed to support youth initiatives, build social and technological infrastructure and foster a rural youth culture that youth can be proud of.

Overwhelmingly, it was agreed that these issues and priorities can best be supported through ongoing local and regional dialogues that aim to address issues deemed important by rural youth.

In moving forward on the issues and priorities identified during this event, the RT-BC and the Rural Secretariat's Regional Advisor for BC have committed to the following actions:

- present youth participants with certificates of appreciation;
- provide youth with a forum to showcase their initiatives - for instance during RT-BC meetings, in the RT-BC newsletter, on the RT-BC Web site;
- continue to actively support rural youth in community capacity building initiatives;
- provide financial and in-kind (e.g. time) support towards the youth component of a province-wide rural conference to be held in Osoyoos, BC in April 2006; and
- seek to have rural youth voices represented at all meetings and events, actively promote youth issues and support rural youth initiatives whenever possible.

Additionally, RT-BC is currently engaging in informal dialogues with youth groups across BC to assess the need and desire to establish regional rural youth networks.

Endnote

¹ Zines are cut and paste self publications that require no professional formatting or layout knowledge. Creating a zine is a simple and creative process involving: the gathering of articles, artwork, sound-off pieces, poems and recipes; pasting them onto paper; photo-copying; folding; stapling; and sending. Zines are both cost and time efficient and have

become an increasingly popular form of youth expression.

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