

News release

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UNBC to lead national research project that addresses health, environment and community impacts of resource development

UNBC's Dr. Margot Parkes and a team of researchers and partners from across Canada have secured a five-year research grant focused on working together across sectors to prevent adverse impacts from resource development, with specific emphasis on rural, remote and Indigenous communities. The study will receive \$2 million from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

The project brings together university researchers and local knowledge-users who have identified a need to better understand and respond to the health, environment and community impacts of resource development. The research team is led by a steering committee comprised of different sectors, disciplines and communities, which is co-chaired by Dr. Parkes and Dr. Sandra Allison, chief medical health officer at Northern Health.

The team of more than 60 people will work together as the ECHO Network (Environment, Community, Health Observatory) and will draw on expertise spanning health, social and natural sciences, including UNBC professor Dr. Henry Harder, Dr. Donald B. Rix BC Leadership Chair for Aboriginal Environmental Health, and other UNBC colleagues. The research also draws on experience from four regional cases. Two are in B.C. (one in the North and the other cross-province), and the others in Alberta and New Brunswick respectively. The study also involves a range of national and international partners.

"Our research team will be looking at the impacts of resource development as a whole, including health, community and environmental considerations," said Dr. Parkes, a Health Sciences associate professor and Canada Research Chair in Health, Ecosystems and Society. "Exploring ways to work together across sectors and jurisdictions is a key part of this project, as well as working with research partners from across Canada and other parts of the world.

"Our goal is to encourage more integration, bringing together knowledge from across sectors, disciplines and organizations to address impacts of resource development that cannot be achieved by the health sector alone," added Parkes. "We have a lot to learn about how to work together on these kinds of issues. The aim is not to fix things when they go wrong but to prevent them in the first place."

The ECHO Network will develop and refine tools and processes that can help detect and prevent effects on health, communities and environments from resource-based operations. Building from current understanding of impact assessment, indicators and lived experiences, the research will focus on finding ways to better recognize and respond to cumulative impacts resulting from past and ongoing resource development within any particular region.

"This research will help fill important knowledge and capacity gaps in rural and other settings, increasing capacity across the country for observing and reporting on impacts related to resource development and how those decisions impact the health of communities and the environment," said Dr. Allison, who will act as the principal knowledge-user for the research project. "The collaboration of intersectoral partners and organizations will define novel approaches and tools to assist with improved resource decisions."

The project involves principal researchers from UNBC (Dr. Margot Parkes, Dr. Henry Harder), Simon Fraser University (Dr. Tim Takaro, Dr. Maya Gislason), **the University of Alberta** (Dr. Lars Hallstrom), the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (Dr. Craig Stephen) and the Université de Moncton (Dr. Céline Surette). Key partners with each of the regional cases include Alberta's Battle River Watershed Alliance, the New Brunswick Environmental Network, and B.C.'s Northern Health Authority and First Nations Health Authority (FHNA). It will also involve numerous other researchers and stakeholders from around the country and the globe, including New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific.

“As First Nations people, our health and wellness is inextricably tied to the land and our territories. Everything is connected; we don’t separate human health from the health of our land and environment. For us, resource development has deep and far-reaching challenges and impacts for our communities, past, present and future,” said Dr. Evan Adams, chief medical officer for the FNHA. “This collaboration will facilitate connection, relationship-building, knowledge-sharing, and the generation of new ideas, supporting us to effectively respond to these complex challenges that impact the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health and wellness of our people.”

In the coming months, the overall team will be established and work will progress on the four regional cases. As part of the project’s launch, a gathering will be held this May in Prince George to bring together the project’s core team members, as well as local stakeholders and partners from Northern B.C. and across Canada.

"Building on a history of collaboration and capacity building across institutions and individuals, this project makes innovative contributions to research, and also the health, well-being and environmental quality of communities across Canada," said Dr. Lars Hallstrom, director of the Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities at the University of Alberta. "The research approach recognizes that rural places and peoples still matter in Canada, but also that rural, remote and Indigenous communities can face particular challenges. Collaborative and highly interdisciplinary teams are one of the best ways to approach these challenges, and to find innovative ways to think differently about equity, the environment, and society in Canada."

"We are eager to share our best practices for cross-sectoral collaboration in addressing children's environmental health issues in New Brunswick, and to learn from best practices in other provinces," says Raissa Marks, executive director, New Brunswick Environmental Network. "It is only through working together across sectors and across the country that we can tackle the complex environmental, health, and social impacts of resource development".

"Improving the quality of life for people living in rural and remote regions, and beyond, is an important part of our research mandate," said UNBC President Dr. Daniel Weeks. "We are delighted that UNBC is actively involved with the creation of many strong partnerships through this project, and look forward to being able to build on these in future collaborations and initiatives."

"CIHR is enabling us to build upon Canada’s reputation as an international leader in interdisciplinary environments and health research. This new network – ECHO – will answer questions that are of great importance to Canadians," said Dr. Steven Hoffman, Scientific Director, CIHR Institute of Population and Public Health. "Specifically, what is the relationship between the social and economic challenges of our most vulnerable environments? On behalf of CIHR, I offer my congratulations to the network and I look forward to the prevention strategies resulting from their work."

The research study is funded by a team grant as part of CIHR’s Environments and Health Signature Initiative. It is supported by the Research Support Fund, a tri-agency initiative of the CIHR, SSHRC and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), which assists Canadian post-secondary institutions and their affiliated research hospitals and institutes with the expenses associated with managing the research funded by these three federal research granting agencies.

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