

THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR CONCEPT: A CONNECTOR ROAD FROM NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN (LA LOCHE, SK) TO THE ATHABASCA OIL SANDS REGION (FORT MCMURRAY, AB)¹

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research paper is to make recommendations on the construction of an all-weather connector road between northern Saskatchewan (La Loche, SK) and the Athabasca Oil Sands region (Fort McMurray, AB), based upon the perspective of the elected leaders living in northwest Saskatchewan. The scope of this all-weather connector road is interprovincial; therefore, continued collaboration is critical as success will require coordination among the municipal, provincial, federal, and Indigenous governments. In this report, I make several recommendations to the northern municipalities, regional representative associations, and the Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade, and Commerce to sustainably govern the interprovincial northern corridor right-of-way research, initial planning, funding, and development. Memorandum of Intent and Cooperation agreements between all rightsholders should be established to recommence advocating for this interprovincial connector road. The research found that the Indigenous traditional territory and kinship relationships that cross through provincial geopolitical jurisdictions is fundamental to incorporate into northern transportation and infrastructure strategies. This research paper may be used as a tool to once again promote the socio-economic value of the proposed connector road and potentially other northern corridor right-of-way projects.

Background

This research paper investigates the construction of an all-season connector road between Saskatchewan and Alberta in Treaty 8 Territory and the Métis Nation Homeland, which would impact the socio-economic conditions of the northern communities. Since 1981, the communities in the northwest region of Saskatchewan have advocated to both the Saskatchewan and Alberta governments to invest in completing an all-season interprovincial connector road between La Loche and Fort McMurray. This advocacy led to a joint announcement in the interprovincial border city of Lloydminster on September 15th, 2005, during which the Premiers promised to construct this road linking northern Saskatchewan to the Athabasca Oil Sands (Alberta Infrastructure and Transportation [AIT], 2005; Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation [SHT], 2005). In 2018, thirty-seven years from the initial local community planning study and thirteen years after governmental announcement of support, the road promised to decrease socio-economic disparities found in the northwestern Saskatchewan remains incomplete within Alberta's geopolitical jurisdiction (SHT, 2007).

In 2011, northwest Saskatchewan community leaders engaged the Primrose Lake Economic Development Corporation Organization and the Boreal West Enterprise Region to identify the Alberta stakeholders and produce a report on the La Loche to Fort McMurray Road (Nichols Applied Management Inc. [NAMI], 2011). The report indicates that a northern connector road between northwestern Saskatchewan and the Athabasca Oil Sands region would increase tourism, commercial, industrial, and economic development (NAMI, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the remaining winter trail between Cheecham, Alberta to Garson Lake, Saskatchewan.

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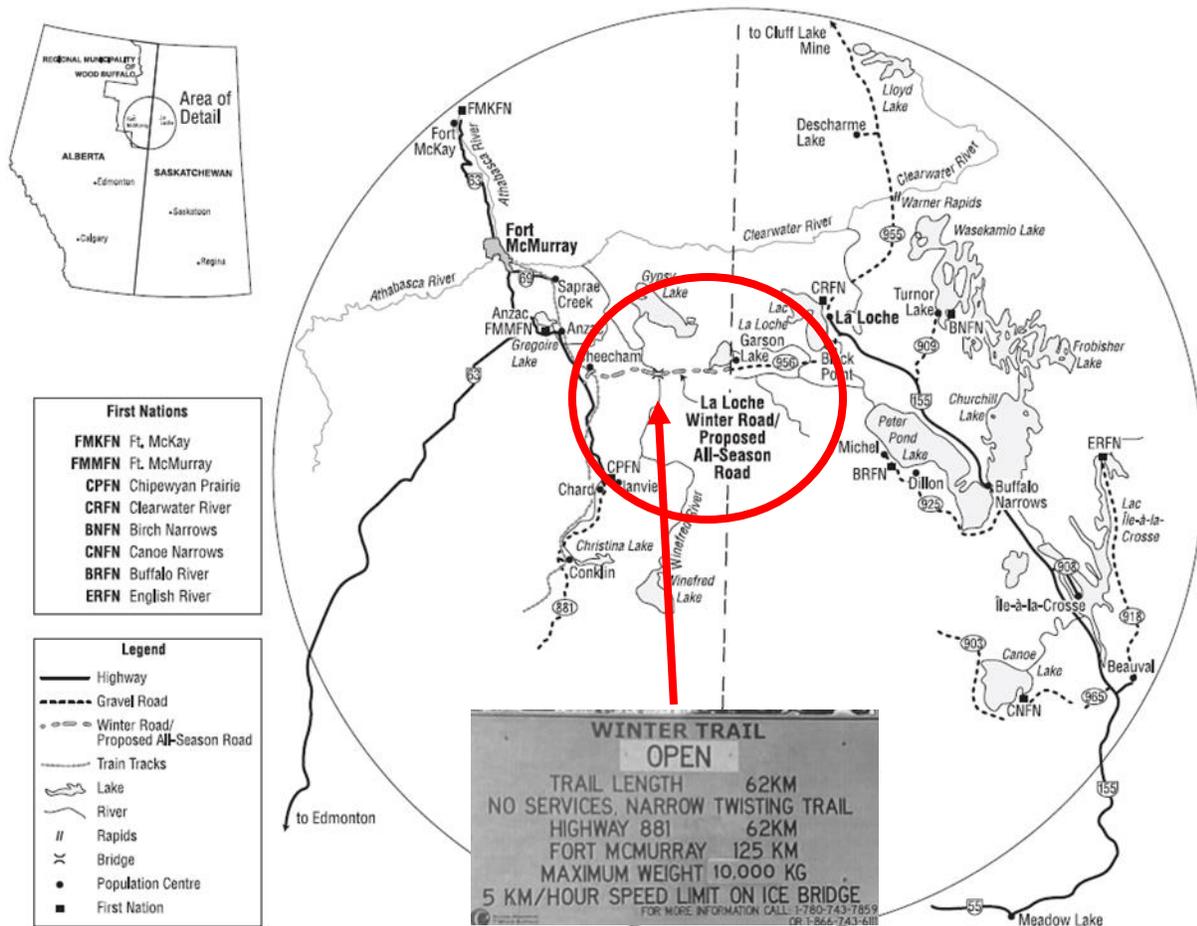


Figure 1: La Loche – Fort McMurray Connector Road & Winter Trail Access Sign (SHT, 2007).

There are only sixty-two kilometers remaining to complete the Connector road for year-round access. Currently, the Rural Municipality of Wood Buffalo annually re-installs and maintains this section as a winter trail (Figure 2). Once the all-season road is complete, the commute from La Loche to Fort McMurray will decrease from nine hours to below two hours (SHT, 2007).

Methodology

To establish the regional perception of the connector road project, I conducted interviews with local leaders and completed a literature review.

- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with local elected leaders and government representatives from northwestern Saskatchewan formed a key part of the research. The interviews focused on their perceptions of the potential community impacts of the northern corridor connector road development, including both positive and negative economic, environmental, cultural, and social impacts. Ten interviews were completed.
- Literature Review: I conducted an extensive literature review, focusing on papers engaging the northern corridor concept and federal duty to consult obligations. These included current government policies, academic research, and departmental plans on the northern corridor right-of-way concept. Findings from the literature review are summarized below in the Northern Corridor Right-of-Way section.

The Northern Corridor Right-of-Way

The Canadian government recognizes the need to address the socio-economic conditions of northern communities, with a focus “[o]n key areas including early learning and child care, education, community infrastructure, child and family services, economic development and violence prevention” (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2017, p. 5). Canadians living in substandard socio-economic environments have poorer health, less education, lower incomes, and fewer occupational competencies than those in wealthier communities (Public Health Agency Canada, 2016). Across Canada, northern communities are attempting to increase employment opportunities and income to positively impact their residents’ health and each region’s socio-economic environment. To improve the socio-economic environment in remote northern areas, scholars have developed the idea of a northern corridor right-of-way (Fellows & Tombe, 2018; Sulzenko & Fellows, 2016; Van Es & Thomas, 1967). According to Sulzenko and Fellows (2016), the idea behind the northern corridor is to create a new east-west trade corridor, which could reduce the cost of living for residents, enable new employment and business opportunities in Northern Canada, and thereby improve living standards.

To improve the Canadian standard of living, the Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade, and Commerce (SSCBTC, 2017) presented a report to the Federal government with the following main findings:

- Inadequate east-west transportation infrastructure limits the extent to which Canada can access tidewater in order to export goods to international markets.
- Canada’s current regulatory approval processes impede the development of major transportation infrastructure in a timely manner.
- There is a lack of ports and routes in Canada’s North that can be used to ship goods abroad.
- The proposal by Mr. Sulzenko and Mr. Fellows for a northern corridor has the potential to address Canada’s limited access to tidewater and the difficulties in developing national infrastructure projects, and to enable the development of the country’s northern regions.
- If the development of the proposed northern corridor is pursued, the federal government must play a leadership role.
- Indigenous peoples’ early participation in the development of the proposed northern corridor would be fundamental to its success.
- Public funding and private-sector investments could finance infrastructure projects within the proposed northern corridor.
- In an effort to minimize delays, the federal and provincial/territorial governments must work together to coordinate their environmental assessment processes in relation to the proposed northern corridor. (p. 1)

Transport Canada’s 2017 budget, which intends to invest \$2 billion over the next 11 years for the National Trade Corridor Fund (NTCF) to build corridors to international markets, includes \$400 million dedicated to fund Northern transportation infrastructure (Transport Canada, 2017, p. 1). Trade and transportation corridor initiatives like the NTCF are critical to interprovincial projects where one province fails to cooperate for the sustainable development of the entire region.

To make sustainable development decisions for a northern corridor right-of-way, it remains the federal government’s duty to consult and actively engage with Indigenous communities prior to any government decisions (Department of Justice, 2017; Newman, 2014). With reconciliation and duty to consult processes as top priorities, the end goal will create cooperation among Indigenous communities, industry partners, and governments (Newman, 2014). In addition, the Canadian government is now a full supporter of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which has implications for public policy (INAC, 2016). To implement public policy changes into the Canadian federal and provincial framework, each government agency is changing their respective departmental plans to respect the nation-to-nation relationship and the following articles within UNDRIP:

- Right to self-determination (Articles 3, 4, and 5);
- Right to participate in decision-making and maintain institutions (Articles 18, 19, 34, and 40);
- Right to make decisions over traditional territory (Articles 26 and 29);
- Right to free, prior, and informed consent (Article 32);
- Right to culture (Articles 8, 11, and 25);
- Right to maintain and protect Indigenous knowledge (Article 31); and
- Right to financial assistance (Article 39). (Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, 2017, p. 29)

Led by Transport Canada, the Transportation Ministries of Alberta and Saskatchewan must cooperate to respect and implement the nation-to-nation relationships and respond to the requests of northern Indigenous communities for transportation infrastructure investment.

Findings

The regional census data of similar communities in the historical Athabasca – Churchill interprovincial region of Alberta and Saskatchewan demonstrates the socio-economic contrast between communities that is caused by the geopolitical boundary and lack of cooperation between the two provinces. While, the estimated workforce in the La Loche to Beauval region is 3,000 people (NAMI, 2011), unemployment rates range from 27 to 44 percent in northwestern Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2016). However, a few hundred kilometers across the interprovincial border where residents have road access to oil sands development, income levels are significantly higher and unemployment rates are 7 to 21 percent (Statistics Canada, 2016). Moreover, there are approximately 15,000 fly-in fly-out (FIFO) full-time workers in the Rural Municipality of Wood Buffalo with 45% of Fort McMurray Airport passengers being FIFO (NAMI, 2018). This large requirement for FIFO full-time workers presents an opportunity for northwestern Saskatchewan residents to obtain employment in the Athabasca Oil Sands (Table 1).

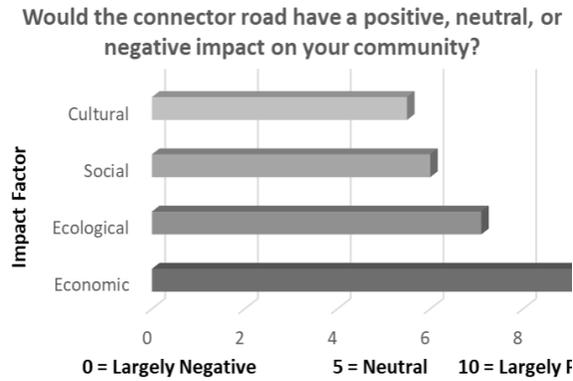
Table 1 – Regional Census Profiles (Statistics Canada, 2016)

Name of Place	Population (2016)	In Labour Force (2016)	Unemployment Rate (2016)	Medium Total Income (2015)
Northwest SK*	10,539	3,455	27.4	\$20,746
La Loche, SK	2,372	525	27.6	\$21,043
Clearwater River Dene Nation, SK	822	565	44.4	\$14,688
RM Wood Buffalo, AB	71,589	44,680	7.0	\$77,481
Fort McKay, AB	742	335	16.4	\$34,048
Janvier, AB	280	145	20.7	\$14,464
Lac la Biche County, AB	8,330	4,380	10.0	\$39,916

* Northwestern Saskatchewan - Keewatin Yatthe Regional Health Authority Region

Socio-economic development and transportation investments in northern Saskatchewan continue to be recorded as ‘Key Actions’ of the Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (SANC) New North Plan for 2017-2018 (SANC, 2017). The interviewed northern Saskatchewan leaders shared concerns that unemployment will increase with current deteriorating economic forecasts in the uranium and forestry industries. However, across the provincial border the Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan of the Athabasca Oil Sands Area (CRISP-AOSA) forecasts continued population growth and employment opportunities (Government of Alberta [GoA], 2011). Unfortunately, the CRISP-AOSA does not forecast the establishment of the interprovincial, all-season connection to Saskatchewan until post-2030 (GoA, 2011; NAMI, 2011).

During the June 25th to 27th, 2018 interviews, the northwestern Saskatchewan elected community leaders agreed that their region would benefit from an all-weather connector road from La Loche, SK to Fort McMurray, AB.



Local leaders believe most (51-75%) community members would agree their rep

Figure 3 – Amalgamated Response from Local Leaders Questionnaire (Personal Communication, June 25th to 27th, 2018)

Most local elected leaders and government representatives from northwest Saskatchewan believe that a La Loche, SK to Fort McMurray, AB connector road would accomplish the following:

- Increased opportunities for recreational property development and outdoor tourism;
- Increased access to an underutilized workforce in the northwest region of Saskatchewan;
- Increased opportunities for social and cultural activities amongst communities in the region related by kinship and family;
- A regional interprovincial role for Fort McMurray. Given the international airport, shopping and recreational amenities, Keyano College, and Northern Lights Regional Health Centre; and
- No effect on the social challenges of drug and alcohol addictions, gangs, crime, and abuse, which are already present in the communities and will not worsen with a connector road.

Most interviewees shared disappointment with the lack of action from the Alberta government. Some interviewees identified the history of partisan politics within Alberta's Progressive Conservative government, which began after Premier Ralph Klein's resignation announcement in 2006. Despite the lack of interprovincial cooperation, for the decade following the original connector road announcement in 2005, the Progressive Conservative government's provincial mandate was to aggressively develop Alberta's Athabasca Oil Sands. The historical Athabasca – Churchill interprovincial region demonstrates the socio-economic contrast amongst communities that is caused by the geopolitical boundary and lack of cooperation between the two provinces. Led by Transport Canada, and while respecting the nation-to-nation relationships and the requests of northern Indigenous communities for investment in infrastructure, the Transportation Ministries of Alberta and Saskatchewan must collaborate to ensure the sustainable development of the north.

Discussions

The existing national transportation system continues to fail northern Canadians. The La Loche to Fort McMurray road project was a focus of a socio-economic study that received political support from both the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments (AIT, 2005; NAMI, 2011; SHT, 2005; SHT, 2007). The study found that recognizing the interprovincial Indigenous traditional territory and kinship relationships is critical when reviewing, planning, and implementing northern transportation strategies. For example, there is a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for cultural and economic collaboration between the Historical Métis Communities of Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan and Fort McKay, Alberta. This cultural and economic collaboration agreement is a strategy for strengthening the region's economy and for rebuilding relationships that were in place long before the establishment of Alberta and Saskatchewan provincial boundaries. In addition, the Northern Village of La Loche, Saskatchewan, Clearwater River Dene Nation, La Loche, Saskatchewan, and Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Fort McMurray, Alberta signed a Memorandum of Intent and Cooperation that recognizes the importance of interprovincial regional relationships in developing the provincial north. However, after years of advocacy by northern communities with few results from the provincial capitals, there are no active interprovincial cooperation and transportation strategies for northern communities. Local elected leaders

recognize that the federal and provincial governments' existing public policy echoes the historic governance approach, which commands, controls, and extracts from the northern regions to supplement the southern populations.

The Government of Canada is currently developing improvements to its long-term strategic planning, environmental, and regulatory review policies for transportation. The current policy changes proposed by the Government of Canada will require strong, passionate leaders to initiate change by using innovative systems that focus on collaboration, critical reflection, and continuous learning, instead of the historic governance model. The governance model must be re-structured to handle the dynamic range of impacts for sustainable development of common pool resources. The operational, legal, procedural, regional, and legal requirements have human factors influencing the outcome based on consensus and cooperation. Stakeholder consensus and cooperation are best achieved when power-sharing is the outcome – and ideally, the beginning of the process (Berkes, 2009; Sandstrom, 2009). Power sharing occurs through adaptive collaborative management (ACM) governance methodologies where the government agencies establish cooperative partnerships to guide decisions on sustainable development (Berkes, 2009; Sandstrom, 2009). This governance model attempts to create an atmosphere of collaboration among government, industry, and Indigenous communities. Therefore, it is critical to structure the model to decentralize decisions, thus empowering regional influences with public policy decisions.

To effectively develop policies for northern transportation development, the federal and provincial governments must respect Indigenous rights and align their agendas with local communities' socio-economic objectives. Such coordination requires improved communication and the building of trust between all parties. Northern Saskatchewan's elected leaders identified the issue of 'inadequate local capacity' to directly benefit from increased economic activity such as tourism or construction. Currently, there is a perceived risk that northern transportation infrastructure investment will be advantageous to southern businesses with FIFO workers, and will ignore long-term regional investment in training, skills, and hiring of local employees. Hiring local employees when existing local capacity may be inadequate requires a collaborative approach between job skills and training educational groups, economic development organizations, government procurement methods, and industry employee hiring policies. Memorandum of Intent and Cooperation agreements may be used between stakeholders to ensure the construction and long-term benefit remains in the northern communities, positively influencing the socio-economic environment of the region.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Improved health, education, and employment are socio-economic objectives for Indigenous communities within the entire historical Athabasca – Churchill interprovincial region. The historical Athabasca - Churchill interprovincial region stakeholders will benefit when Indigenous communities are empowered to influence regional development plans crossing provincial boundaries. Because the scope of this connector road is interprovincial, collaboration is critical as success will require coordination among the Indigenous, municipal, provincial, and federal governments. The Federal Minister of Transportation announced a new vision for Canada's national transportation system, titled Transportation 2030 (Transport Canada, 2016). Transportation 2030 will focus on five themes during the process: "the traveller; safer transportation; green and innovative transportation; waterways, coasts, and the North; and trade corridors to global markets" (Transport Canada, 2016). These five guiding themes will influence the changes made to the national transportation system.

In response to the national transportation vision, I make the following recommendations:

- Communities of Île-à-la-Crosse and Fort McKay should continue their cultural and economic collaboration and raise this interprovincial connector road to the Métis Nation of Alberta to influence provincial transportation strategies in northeastern Alberta.

- The Village of La Loche and Clearwater River Dene Nation bring forward the Memorandum of Intent and Cooperation to the Rural Municipality of Wood Buffalo to attempt to re-sign the agreement and advocate once again for this interprovincial transportation connection to the Alberta provincial government.
- A regional representative group such as the Primrose Lake Economic Development Corporation Organization, the Northwest Communities Management Company, or the Saskatchewan Association of Northern Communities (SANC) - New North should:
 - Share this research paper with each Alberta Stakeholder listed in the La Loche – Fort McMurray Road Alberta Stakeholder Identification report (NAMI, 2011).
 - Submit a proposal for project funding to Transport Canada's Trade and Transportation Corridors Initiative: National Trade Corridor Fund (NTCF).
 - Establish contact with The Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade, and Commerce to keep up to date on the northern corridor initiative.
- The Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade, and Commerce create an Athabasca – Churchill regional Northern Corridor Committee with appointed members from the federal, provincial, and Indigenous nations to sustainably govern the interprovincial northern corridor right-of-way research and initial planning.

This research paper may be used as a tool to promote the socio-economic value of the proposed connector road and potentially other northern corridor right-of-way projects. Other northern Indigenous communities may benefit from the paper's assessment of applicable literature and governmental policy impacting decisions on transportation and infrastructure development in the Canadian north. Transport Canada's Transportation 2030, Saskatchewan Highways and Infrastructure's Northern Transportation Strategy, and Alberta's Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan are strategic plans which may be influenced by additional academic research regarding the socio-economic benefits of northern transportation infrastructure investments (Government of Alberta, 2011; Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure, n.d.; Transport Canada, 2017).

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