



# Climate Politics in the Patch

Engaging Saskatchewan's Oil-Producing Communities  
on Climate Change Issues

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CANADIAN CENTRE  
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SASKATCHEWAN OFFICE



**CORPORATE**  
MAPPING PROJECT

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Eaton is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Regina and a co-investigator with the Corporate Mapping Project. She is the author of two books, *Fault Lines: Life and Landscape in Saskatchewan's Oil Economy* (with photographer Valerie Zink) and *Growing Resistance: Canadian Farmers and the Politics of Genetically Modified Wheat*. Her work concerns environmental, social, and economic aspects of resource development and resource-based communities.

ALL PHOTOS by Valerie Zink ([www.valeriezink.com](http://www.valeriezink.com))

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# Introduction

The future of oil extraction and transportation is one of the most contentious issues in Canadian politics. Plans for the construction of new pipelines to both the East and West coasts has entrenched old divisions between Eastern and Western Canada and opened up new schisms in Western Canada between sites of extraction and communities along pipeline routes. At the provincial level, the Alberta NDP Premier Rachel Notley has asserted that BC has no exclusive claim to its coasts, while a new NDP government in BC has made it clear that it will seek to halt the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline expansion.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, Saskatchewan's Premier, Brad Wall, has vowed he will fight Trudeau's national carbon pricing floor until the bitter end.

At the local level, people living in oil and gas-producing communities are being mobilized by oil advocacy groups to defend their industry from (perceived) attacks from urban environmentalists concerned with climate change. Meanwhile, settler and Indigenous communities downstream of the tar sands and other oil and gas projects are sounding alarm bells about the local impacts of extraction on health and the environment. Divisions between urban and rural, environment and jobs, East and West, Indigenous and non-Indigenous seem only to be sharpening. Speaking to the Calgary Petroleum Club in 2016, Premier Wall vowed to defend the oil industry against the "existential threat" posed by activists such as Hollywood stars, proponents of the Leap Manifesto, and universities, churches, and public pension funds considering divesting from oil (Fletcher, 2016).

This report examines the beliefs and perceptions of people living in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities as they relate to issues such as climate change, environmentalism, and the contentious politics of oil. It is part of a larger study titled *Oil's Rural Reach: Social Licence in Saskatchewan's Oil Producing Communities*, in which we identified a very high level of acceptance and defence of the oil industry among differently positioned people across several communities. Furthermore, our participants dismissed concerns about climate change, were antagonistic towards people they understood as urban environmentalists and Eastern politicians, and believed that the oil industry was already a leader in terms of adopting environmentally sound practices. Given these findings, we argue for a different way of engaging rural communities on the contentious politics of oil, one that focuses on the significant local impacts of extraction and the real grievances of people living beside oil infrastructure. We argue that our best hope of pushing past the current oil impasse will involve taking seriously the grievances of those living with oil, while articulating a concrete alternative economic/energy vision for rural Saskatchewan communities. At stake is the shape of carbon politics in the province, where rural oil-producing communities have showed some of the strongest support for the right-wing Saskatchewan Party government.

We argue for a different way of engaging rural communities on the contentious politics of oil, one that focuses on the significant local impacts of extraction and the real grievances of people living beside oil infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain expansion proposes to twin its existing 1,150 km pipeline and thereby triple its capacity to 890,000 barrels a day of oil, primarily from Alberta's tar sands (Hoekstra, 2017). The project has been controversial in BC as it would dramatically increase tanker traffic to the Burnaby terminal and imperil the coastline and marine ecology. The pipeline expansion has already received approval from the National Energy Board and support from the federal Liberal government. In BC, however, the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation and 72% of Burnaby residents oppose the pipeline (Council of Canadians, n.d.), and the new NDP government campaigned on halting it.

# Oil's Rural Reach

This report is based on our research into the ways in which the oil industry shapes the everyday institutions and culture of rural life in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities. The study involved two components. In the initial phase we tracked corporate contributions from the oil industry to three municipalities and their surrounding rural areas including the city of Weyburn (rural municipality of Weyburn) and the towns of Kindersley (rural municipality of Kindersley) and Oxbow (Rural Municipality of Enniskillen). Corporate contributions to fire and emergency services, health and health services, leisure and recreation, human services, and other community infrastructure were identified using local newspapers, and corporate reports and websites for the period of 2007-2016. The largest corporate contributions we identified during this period in the three study areas included a \$4.5 million donation by Crescent Point Energy to the Weyburn Hospital Foundation, a \$250,000 donation from Penn West to the Kindersley Hospital for x-ray and ultrasound equipment and other renovations, and a \$250,000 donation by Cenovus Energy to the Weyburn Community, Culture and Convention Centre. There were also many small donations of a few thousand that went to food banks, public libraries, walking trails, fire departments and much more.<sup>2</sup>

In the second phase of the project we conducted 25 interviews in the summer of 2016 with rural and town councillors and administrators, farmers and landowner organizations, members of conservation organizations, representatives from community organizations and human services, school teachers, and oil company representatives from several unnamed oil-producing municipalities in Saskatchewan. The municipalities and affiliations of the individuals interviewed remain confidential so as to protect informants' identities. We identified potential organizations and groups using purposive sampling based on their connections to oilfield donations and oil interests. Interviewees were then chosen based on their role within the organization, their availability for interview, and snowball sampling with the goal of soliciting a wide diversity of perspectives and locations. Interviewees were asked to give their thoughts and perspectives about oil industry donations, community reliance on the oil industry, climate change, local impacts of oil, and how criticisms of the industry are viewed by the community. This report summarizes some of the persistent themes captured by these interviews. The views of the informants cannot be considered to be representative, but we did find a surprising convergence of views across occupations and geography.

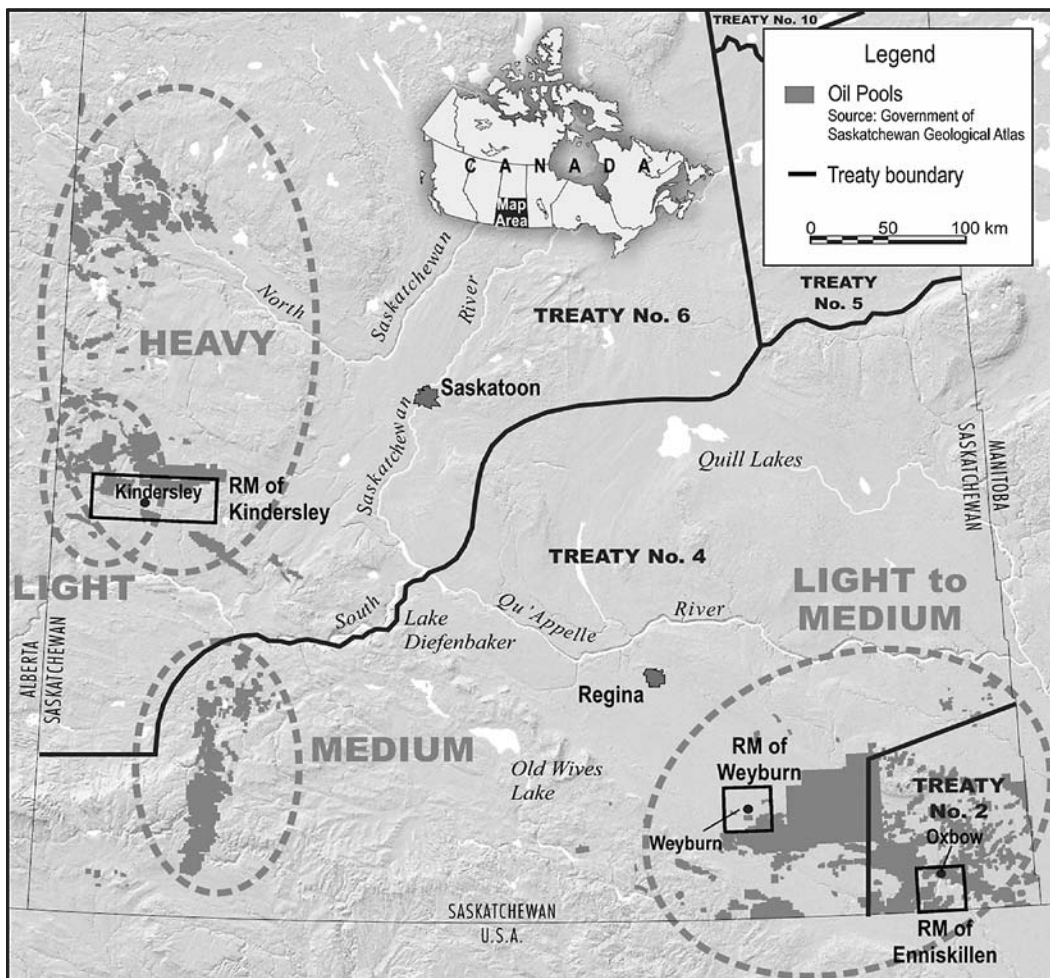
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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed breakdown and analysis of oil industry contributions to these communities, see Emily Eaton and Simon Enoch (in press) *Oil's Rural Reach: Social Licence in Saskatchewan's Oil Producing Communities*. *Canadian Journal of Communication*.

# Background

Saskatchewan is Canada's second largest oil producing province and the sixth largest oil producing jurisdiction in North America. In 2015, the province averaged 486,000 barrels a day of production with around 65% of that exported to the United States (Government of Saskatchewan, no date, a) Oil is not new to the province of Saskatchewan. Commercial production began in the 1940s, thus many communities have lived alongside the ups and downs of the industry for several generations. Agricultural consolidation and corporatization have, however, produced a much greater dependency on oil in recent years. While some rural communities suffered population loss and decline, other oil-producing communities enjoyed a recent boom (from roughly 2006-2014) that has allowed some smaller-scale farmers to stay on their lands and enticed workers in a variety of direct and indirect industries to relocate to oil-producing communities (See Zink and Eaton, 2016).

Oil is not new to the province of Saskatchewan. Commercial production began in the 1940s, thus many communities have lived alongside the ups and downs of the industry for several generations.



Map created by Weldon Hiebert

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*Aerial image  
of dispersed oil  
pads north of  
Lloydminster, SK*

The most recent boom, beginning in the mid 2000s and ending with the 2014 crash in global oil prices was the product of advancements in new technologies such as horizontal drilling, multi-stage fracturing, thermal extraction, and flooding techniques as well as high oil prices. During this boom the pace and scale of drilling and production expanded, resulting in high rates of employment, strained social services, soaring housing prices and minuscule vacancy rates. Saskatchewan's oil industry is unlike the tar sands of Alberta where there are large industrial scale projects with (unevenly) unionized work forces. In Saskatchewan, single wells are scattered over vast geographies, and once they are drilled they require small amounts of labour to produce.

While the health, safety, and environmental risks associated with new extraction technologies like multi-stage fracking have been criticized by academics and social movements in other jurisdictions, they have been met with little social opposition in Saskatchewan. A Globe and Mail article from 2011 suggested that the province's former status as a have-not province and the "poor cousin" of Alberta, was changing and that people in Saskatchewan are genuinely enthusiastic about the province's new-found wealth associated with the oil and commodities booms of the 2000s (Pitts, 2011). However, after oil prices crashed in 2014, the government introduced severe austerity budgets, citing low government revenues from oil royalties as a significant contributor to the cuts. In a rather tortuous logic, Premier Wall has argued that cuts to public programmes and services will reduce our dependency on resource extraction (Hoye, 2017). According to the government of Saskatchewan the oil industry contributed 15% of the provincial GDP in 2015 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017). As a percentage of total government revenue, oil and gas has contributed between 23.8 % (in 2009) and 12.3% (in 2015) over the last decade.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This data was compiled by Dr. Angela Carter using the Public Accounts, Volume 1 Available at <http://www.publications.gov.sk.ca/deplist.cfm?d=15&c=268> and data provided on the resource surcharge from Jeff Welke, Ministry of Finance.

# Climate Dismissal

In our interviews with diverse participants across several oil-producing communities we found a great degree of dismissal about anthropogenic climate change. It should be noted that public opinion polling has already shown that people in Saskatchewan (especially in South-eastern Saskatchewan) are among the least likely in Canada to think the earth is warming, that humans are mostly to blame for the warming, and to support cap and trade systems or carbon taxes (Mildenberger, Howe, Marlon and Leiserowitz, 2016).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this polling also shows that in Canadian regions that produce the most greenhouse gases, people are less likely to believe that climate change is human-induced. This is a significant finding, given that social science literature on climate scepticism in the Anglo world, including the US, UK, Australia and Canada, has found that party affiliation and ideological values are significantly correlated with climate scepticism (McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Whitmarsh, 2011; Fielding, et. Al., 2012). A survey conducted by Davidson and Hann (2012) on attitudes towards climate change in Alberta also showed political ideology as the strongest predictor of belief in human induced climate change and the severity of its impacts. The study also found that women were significantly more aware about climate change and its perceived impacts. While these studies show some consistency in terms of the significance of political ideology, they don't tell us how political ideology is formed or how it is spatialized. For example, the oil and gas producing regions of Saskatchewan have produced some of the strongest election results for the right-wing Saskatchewan Party. In our research, which cannot be considered representative, we found significant levels of climate change dismissal among both men and women (more than half of our interviewees were women).

In each interview, we posed questions related to climate change and asked participants to elaborate on how climate change is viewed in their community. Interestingly, participants often answered questions about climate change by commenting on other forms of environmental pollution or contamination. For example, one elementary school teacher responded in the following way to our question about whether climate change is incorporated into early years curriculum:

Well, we kind of do because we do a Soil Unit and a Plant Unit so we talk about pollution and how it affects our environment — more soil I guess. But yes, we talk about chemicals that go into the soil and spills and that kind of stuff. But it's pretty limited in [early years] what they understand or it wouldn't be as big as in high school, I guess.

The slippage here between climate change, whose mitigation involves a focused agenda of reducing carbon, and other environmental issues is consistent with what Boyd (2015) found in her interviews about carbon capture used for enhanced oil recovery in the Weyburn area. The majority of Boyd's participants, for example, were adamant that climate change was

Public opinion polling has already shown that people in Saskatchewan (especially in South-eastern Saskatchewan) are among the least likely in Canada to think the earth is warming.

<sup>4</sup> On the question of whether climate change is happening, only 56% in the Souris-Moose Lake riding in South-East Saskatchewan agreed, compared to 77% nationally and 91% in the riding of Halifax.

not occurring and confused the problems associated with increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere with ozone depletion (86). Other studies have similarly shown confusion among teachers and students between the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion (see for example Papadimitriou, 2004). The evidence of low levels of climate science literacy we found in our interviews may be related to our interviewee's dismissal of climate change. However, other authors have also observed a degree of slippage between climate change and other environmental issues across many different populations.

## Doubting the Science and the Human Causes of Climate Change

Dismissal of climate change took at least three main forms in our interviews. First interviewees raised doubts about the climate science and/or the human causes of climate change. The following elected representative of a rural municipality provided typical responses to our questions about climate change, which included hypothesizing alternative human-made causes for extreme weather in the area:

we've certainly had some flooding but certainly not to the [degree] that other places have, and we look at it and say 'is this just not a weather cycle?' We have lots of highways, lots of infrastructure and what we have put in [referring to built infrastructure and human alteration of the landscape] can change the flow of water, so if that was all done in a year where we had average rainfall and then you have excessive rainfall, did we cause some of our flooding issues ourselves?

This same representative also suggested that rural people have good reasons to doubt the existence of climate change:

I think it's very similar across the country — you get into the rural areas and really there's a lot of question as to whether or not it is actually a phenomenon. That this is being caused by something and you get into the urbans, which probably are felt to have a bit more of an impact, because it's concentrated, lots of vehicles, generally lots of activity happening and so maybe a bit more pressure in their areas. Maybe they're feeling that they want to do more to prevent it; you get out into the ag areas and I walked five kilometers today and I never met a single vehicle. So I think there's a very different feeling as to whether there is even a phenomenon that's tied to climate change and then who is responsible.

A worker from an oilfield service company reinforced the idea that rural people are more suspicious of climate change science and feel they are being unfairly blamed for the problem:

I don't ever talk to anyone about climate change. We kind of joke about it ... Well, like no one really knows what the weather was like how many years ago. I think us being in the rural area [we] see the cities and all the pollution they're creating, right? We feel like we get hounded for what we're doing more so than what goes on in industrial areas in other cities. There's lots of pollution there. I think we're fairly regulated and we abide by the rules. I know I'm environmentally conscious.

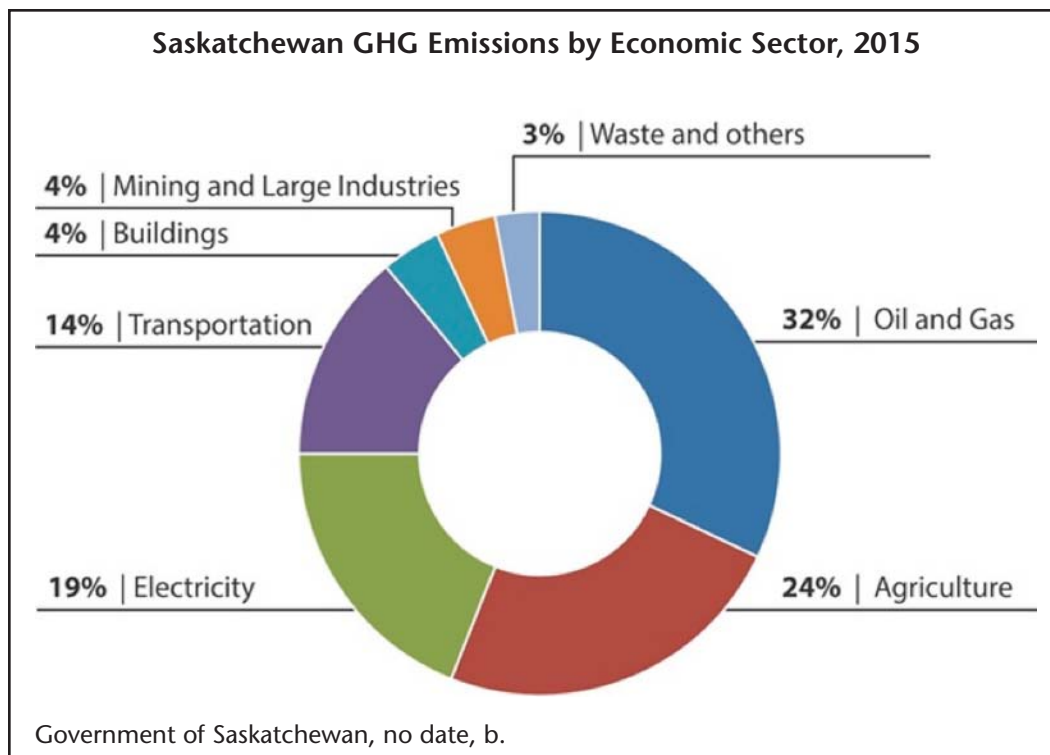
While the above participant indicated that climate change is a subject for joking around, another interviewee from a local nature group suggested it could be risky to talk about it all:

[Having a conversation about planning for the effects of climate change] would not go over well here; I can't imagine it. No not at all. You'd be run out of town. I don't even talk about that. I don't talk about anything like that. The only thing ... and I'm all for that, obviously, but the only thing I've been vocal about is just the emissions [referring to the venting and flaring of waste gas by the industry]: the emissions and just the irresponsibility.



## Our Contributions are Too Small to Matter

Second, interviewees argued that even if climate change were a problem, Saskatchewan and Canada's contributions to global emissions are so small that the province has minimal responsibility to enact significant climate policies. This was a prevalent view despite the fact that Saskatchewan has the highest per capita emissions in the country and despite that Canada is among the top ten global emitters on an absolute basis and in the top three in terms of per capita emissions (Boothe and Boudreault, 2016). Interviewees diminished the greenhouse gas emissions produced by the oil industry by contrasting rural areas with urban areas or Canadian with foreign emissions. However, the Government of Saskatchewan reported that 32% of Saskatchewan's total GHG emissions were produced by the oil and gas industry in 2015 (Government of Saskatchewan, no date, b). Moreover, the industry's fugitive emissions (wasted oil and gas that leaks from wellheads, pipelines and is flared during production) accounts for more than half of the industry's total emissions and fully 17% of the province's total emissions (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2017).



Despite the significant contribution of Canada, Saskatchewan, and the oil and gas industry to global emissions an elected representative of a rural municipality said:

I'm not the best climate change person to talk to because I don't necessarily buy into all of that, and I struggle with ... the fact that Canada is taking responsibility for so much of an issue that we are actually a very small emitter in the grand scheme of things. From a rural perspective, right? ... I think that we've taken far too much responsibility in this country for an issue that — I'm not saying that there isn't something there, but when you compare a picture of a city in some of these other countries and the emissions that may come out of that, and you compare that to the Estevan coal mine, for example, I struggle with that part of it.

An economic development officer we interviewed puzzled over how to spark people in rural areas to engage in actions to reduce GHG emissions given the common view that climate change is the responsibility and liability of other communities:

so when you produce an idea like climate change having any kind of impact, we're doing it wrong [community members will claim] that's happened somewhere else and over there and a hundred years from now. I don't know how we do the job where you can say, okay, there's a direct connection to if not your lifestyle, then the lifestyle of your children, your grandchildren. Things are changing quickly. It's different than when I was a kid.

A last example of this prevalent view comes from an oil company representative who emphasizes that it would be not only futile for people and industry in rural Saskatchewan to act, but it would also be too costly:

Well, I think it's definitely happening. But yeah, very little conversation over it, and I think it's one of those things that it's so big that I don't think the changes — how do I put this? So it is happening, but I think everybody sits back and goes that there are so many violators that if we do our part, is it really going to make a difference? Because you look at some big refineries and stuff that are the biggest percentage of the facilities causing some of this stuff, we're a small part. We do our part, but we're really a small part. I don't think that change will ever happen to where it makes a difference. I'll never see it; I doubt if my kids will ever see it. There's a big cost to that, and I'm just not sure that companies and provinces and stuff can afford it.

## Saskatchewan Might Actually Come Out Ahead

The third form of dismissal we encountered in our interviews involved the idea that on balance, Saskatchewan might come out ahead with regard to the impacts of climate change. This view was held by more than one interviewee. An administrator for a rural municipality, for example, suggested:

We've seen, in the last fifteen years, farming here — crops production has increased exponentially. The rainfall is a little more — so I mean ... there's winners and losers in climate change. This may be a 'winner' area; we don't know. Are we going to have a little more rain? Is it proven out that that's going to happen? I don't know. As a municipality though, we haven't done anything.

And a farmer agreed that “Actually climate change, I think, has benefitted us over the last ten years right here ... It's given us lots of rain.”

It is clear from the above quotations that there is a significant degree of dismissal about the existence, attribution, and impacts of climate change in oil-producing communities in Saskatchewan. Given this dismissal and the lack of knowledge around what climate change is and isn't, we believe that organizations should not take for granted the existence and severity of climate change in their public campaigns and mobilization efforts if they wish to connect with people in oil-producing areas. Our findings about attitudes towards climate change also raise questions about how climate change is being taught as part of the curriculum in rural areas. Our participants tended to be middle-aged, so it is possible that younger generations have higher levels of climate change science literacy. However, the significant levels of climate change dismissal among middle aged adults no doubt shapes the environment in which younger generations are socialized.

# Environmentalism

As antagonistic as people in oil-producing communities can be to environmentalists and climate change activism, our interviewees did not shy away from talking about the environment. In particular, participants identified strongly with a discourse that sees the oil industry as compatible with environmental protection and were eager to stress what the oil industry was already doing to protect the environment. For example, interviewees highlighted how much industry has improved over the years by adopting practices that minimize land impacts. As one interviewee who works for an oil service company stated:

You know what? I think they do a pretty good job of their safety, their environment; it's not like it was thirty years ago where you had an oil spill, nobody knew about it and you just covered it up kind of thing. You have to report everything. I don't know, I think the oil companies do a good job now of protecting the environment and they're always — it's always about safety as well.

Similarly a manager at a production company emphasized that strict environmental regulations sufficiently protect the environment and the public.

That flare is burning but you also have to realize that we do periodic testing. Like, it's a requirement by the Saskatchewan government that we do certain things to make sure that our emissions are in line; we're not flaring more gas or venting more gas than we should ... but it's all tested and tracked so you can provide these people [anyone suspicious of health and environmental impacts] that information and go 'no, you're okay'.

But it was not just people working in the oil industry that viewed industry's environmental practices as favourable. Members of a local conservation group agreed. One suggested "I think that the fact that they're even doing environmental protection ... [is] absolutely marvelous ... Developers don't have to do that kind of thing and they should be doing that too." Another characterized requirements that companies submit environmental assessment documents as red tape "But four years ago in the oil patch, once they built a hole there was a service rig on there in a week. Now it can take up to two months of the red tape — environment." Others from the conservation group agreed that the environmental reclamation process for decommissioning wells has improved and that companies no longer dispose of unwanted wastes into the environment. Interestingly, these comments were made at the same time as reports were surfacing from Alberta and Saskatchewan about the problems associated with increasing numbers of orphaned wells that have been left unremediated and abandoned by companies in the wake of the 2014 slump in oil prices (Johnson, 2016; Thomson, 2016).

Participants in our research also held a great deal of faith in technology as the answer to environmental problems. One participant, a non-oilfield small business owner, characterized the prevailing views in his community in this way:

Everybody thinks ... we'll geo-engineer ourselves out of th[ese] climate change issues through efficient fracking technology. We'll be able to extract for years and years without really thinking about the fact that we're still burning this shit.

"Everybody thinks ... we'll geo-engineer ourselves out of these climate change issues through efficient fracking technology. We'll be able to extract for years and years without really thinking about the fact that we're still burning this shit."

Speaking about Cenovus Energy's project<sup>5</sup> that uses carbon dioxide from SaskPower's new carbon capture facility to force more oil out of an old oilfield, an administrator of a rural municipality celebrated that "Cenovus is injecting as much CO<sub>2</sub> into the ground every day as we produce as a province." His enthusiasm belies the fact that Cenovus has in fact, only injected 30 million tons of carbon dioxide into its field since 2000, or an average of about 2 Mt per year. However, Saskatchewan produces 75.5 Mt of greenhouse gases per year, with the oil and gas industry responsible for 25.3 Mt (See Cenovus, 2017 and Flanagan, Zimmerman, Horne and Frappé-Sénéclauze 2016).

With regard to the possibility of transitions to new sources of energy and alternative economies, interviewees characterized these transitions as not currently viable and only legitimate if introduced through industry investments in technological advancement. Nearly every participant in this research emphasized how dependent all aspects of all our lives are on fossil fuels, and how movements that want to transition away from oil would be taking society backward in terms of social development. Many pointed to the often-used trope in the fossil fuel industry of activists protesting oil while driving cars, flying in airplanes etc. However, the possibility of transition was not totally written off, if it was undertaken by the oil industry itself. For example, a farmer and former land man (a person employed to negotiate surface leases for access to mineral rights on behalf of oil companies) said

[T]he land company that I worked with for years now has a land man based in Medicine Hat and is doing solar panel leases in Alberta. Absolutely 100% unheard of and if you would have mentioned it, you might have got fired. That's just a figure of speech, but now they have a land man based in Medicine Hat doing solar panel leases with farmers. It's changing.

Another interviewee, the owner of a local oil production company was clear about the inefficacy of protestors and his preference for renewable economies to be led by the oil industry:

[W]e've been involved with the Green Energy Project ourselves since 1997. I've got a wind-metering tower that's been up for ten or twelve years. And I think people think that the oil industry is the oil industry, and I don't tend to like defining ourselves as saying we're in the oil industry because I believe we're the energy industry. And when it comes to renewables, most of that capital investment and most of that ingenuity and that change isn't going to be driven by somebody holding a sign, standing out on a sidewalk in front of a public hearing for a pipeline. It's going to be somebody that's producing energy already, whether it's hydro or nuclear or oil and gas. We're going to be the ones that are taking the risks and investing the dollars to creating energy in a different form, because that's what we're interested in, is the energy industry.

In summary, our interviewees were insistent on the already environmentally sound practices of the oil industry and strongly preferred industry, not social movements or government, to lead any transitions to renewable economies. These findings are consistent with underlying feelings of defensiveness against outside criticism and with the economic insecurity associated with the uncertain future of oil, an industry that so dominates rural Saskatchewan.

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<sup>5</sup> Cenovus Energy's Weyburn oilfield project is Canada's largest carbon dioxide enhanced oil recovery project and is touted by the Saskatchewan government and Cenovus as the "world's largest geological CO<sub>2</sub> storage project" (Cenovus, n.d.) It is a carbon capture and storage project that uses captured CO<sub>2</sub> from a coal fired electricity plant as a method of flooding the Weyburn oil field, and thus, producing more oil. The carbon capture and storage demonstration project received \$240m from the Government of Canada and over \$1.4b of investment from the provincial crown corporation SaskPower. Since its unveiling 2014, the 'clean coal' project has been mired by breakdowns and maintenance setbacks. In June, 2017, the capture unit had only been operating 68.5% of the time since it came online (Fraser, 2017). Moreover, in 2016 SaskPower had to pay \$1.2m to Cenovus for failing to deliver the carbon dioxide it had contracted to the company (Langenegger, 2016).

# Resource Nationalism

Criticisms of the oil industry were consistently represented by interviewees as outside threats to communities emanating from out-of-touch and ignorant urban environmentalists, and Eastern politicians. This discourse rooted in western alienation is not at all new; it grew up alongside the settler wheat economy when farmers felt exploited by large multinational companies, Eastern banks, and the vagaries of international markets while Eastern economies were being protected through tariffs. Tariff protection of Central Canadian manufacturing alienated settlers in the West because they had to buy farm inputs and consumer goods from protected industries, while selling in unprotected international markets (McGrane, 2014: 75-76). In this context, Western settlers were locked into a structural relationship of inequality with the East. In 1984, Larry Pratt identified “resource nationalism” in Alberta where central Canada was seen as the greatest obstacle to economic development in the province.

Contemporary resource nationalism maintains an antagonism towards politicians who make policy in the interests of central Canada, but abandons a critique of multinational corporations. Rather than being understood as one of the sources of exploitation, corporations (especially resource extraction companies) are now understood as victims in need of protection through a nationalist (or regionalist) discourse. This resource nationalism pits any regulatory or taxation attempts by national politicians against the interests of the West, where resource extraction is seen as the lifeblood of the economy. As Adkin and Stares (2016: 221-222) point out in relation to the Alberta government’s defence of its oil industry, this nativist discourse homogenizes Albertans while aligning them with the interests of the oil companies. In this context, all threats to the industry (whether from climate change activists or federal politicians touting carbon taxes) must be silenced. In Alberta, for example, the Calgary Herald has covered environmental protests and criticism of the tar sands in such a way as to dismiss environmentalists as an ill-informed, ideologically motivated, and globally funded lobby. In this context of being under siege, the role of the government is to actively promote and defend the industry (Gunster and Saurette, 2014).

Here in Saskatchewan, Premier Wall has also consistently mobilized a resource nationalist discourse while claiming that he will vigorously oppose Trudeau’s carbon price in order to protect the interests of Saskatchewan people. Here again, the interests of the population are assumed to match the interests of the industry. Wall has also demonized climate change activists as being anti-Saskatchewan and promoting magical theories characterized by “pixie dust and unicorns” (CBC News, 2016).

A couple of quotations illustrate the salience of the resource nationalist discourse for our participants. A community volunteer suggested that:

I would say the prevailing opinion is those who are making decisions about things like climate change are making them on broad brush stroke generalities ... But personally my opinion of that is ... it’s fear-based, because someone like Justin Trudeau who didn’t get any votes this side of the Manitoba border is talking about making broad sweeping

“Someone like Justin Trudeau who didn’t get any votes this side of the Manitoba border is talking about making broad sweeping changes that is literally going to put our entire communities in financial jeopardy — it’s a feeling of betrayal and it’s a feeling of fear.”

changes that is literally going to put our entire communities in financial jeopardy – it's a feeling of betrayal and it's a feeling of fear. That people who don't understand and haven't taken the time to understand the situation, are going to make decisions that are going to affect us directly, without our input ... Because it's so volatile and it's so intrinsic to what we do, so it's not just — it's not like, oh, a new tax; it's every move affects the price of oil, affects the decisions in Calgary, affects the amount of work that is here, affects the ability to go to work, affects our kid's education in the future. It's so tied to it. I always say 'we don't go to the casino because I live in oil country and we farm'. Every day is a gamble; every sound bite that gets shared in the news could affect the markets to the point that you might not have a job tomorrow.

The owner of a local oil production company also reiterated this East-West divide. When reflecting on the recent media attention to orphaned oil and gas wells in Alberta and Saskatchewan he was emphatic that Quebec and Ontario have similar, if not worse problems, but that they are not being reported:

But there again, it's that optics thing. Everybody is happy to point the finger at Alberta or BC or Saskatchewan, and what we're not doing [cleaning up orphaned wells]. [But] the ones that have a huge issue and a problem with this is Quebec and Ontario.

These same two participants also best exemplified the distrust of urban environmentalists.

So there's lots of these groups that are kind of lobbying or they're sort of lobbyists, but I think they're totally missing the point. I always kind of chuckle, the stuff — even if it's on Twitter — when you see everybody is in some bay in Vancouver and just up the coast and there's oil tankers going past them — because it's happening right now as we speak — and everybody is sitting in a kayak that's made from petroleum, right? ... it's hard to change people's minds that way right? [oil production company owner]

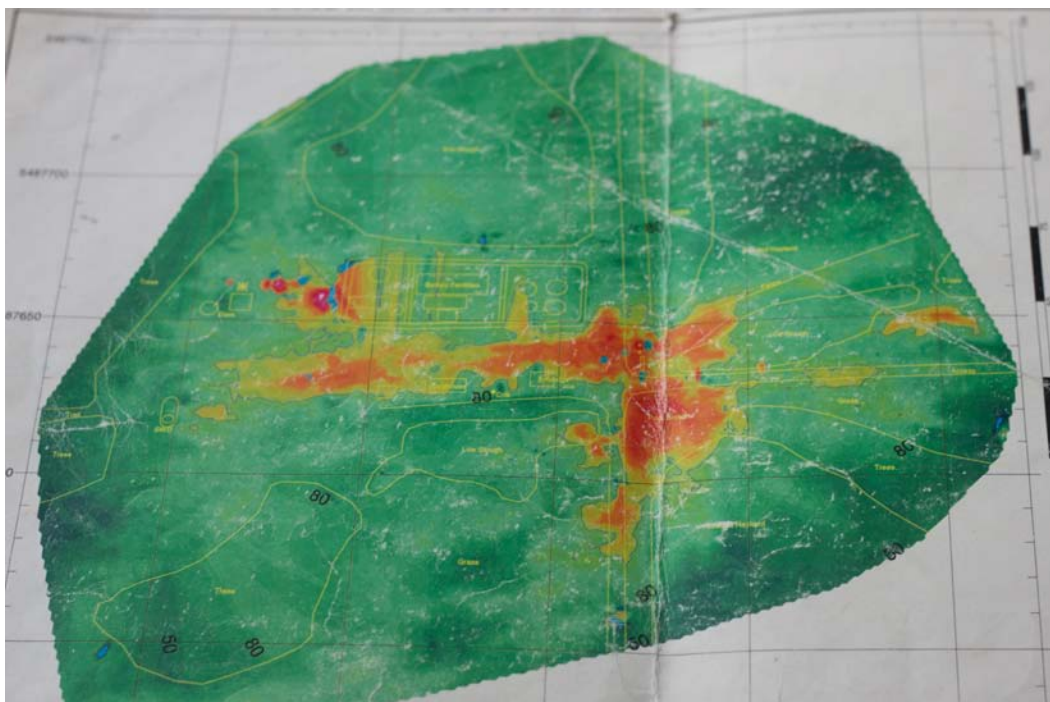
Name something that doesn't require crude oil. So it's this sense of how would you get from here to a place where there was no oil and just that whole sense of betrayal where for somebody who is using what we're producing to actively — to rally, to protest, enact changes against it: David Suzuki with his diesel-burning bus driving across the country telling everybody that fossil fuels are bad. And you go: that's the problem; it's that hypocriticalness. Nothing — the world runs on oil ... But it feels maybe a little like it is politically savvy to make oil the whipping boy ... because it's easy for media to make oil into something that then becomes the enemy, but it feels like that strips the faces of the people who are actually directly affected by that. Big oil — there's no such thing as 'big oil'. It's all of our friends and neighbours and people running our towns and supporting us. We have a brand new co-op; that didn't get put in place because of the farmers. [Community volunteer]

In addition to the quotations presented in this section that show an antagonism to environmentalists and Eastern politicians, many of our interviewees blamed urban areas for the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions. This attribution can be seen in the quotations about climate dismissal. It is clear then, that the environmental movement will need to think strategically about how best to engage people in rural oil-producing communities on questions of climate change and renewable economies.

# Oil's Impacts and the Culture of Silence

Thus far we have established that many participants in this research are dismissive of climate change and feel that criticisms of the oil industry come from outside attacks by environmentalists and Eastern politicians. Moreover, many insist that the oil industry is already performing well in terms of environmental protection. Yet, several interviewees in this research did complain about the impacts of oil in their communities. Interestingly, complaints about the oil industry often came from the same interviewees who expressed climate dismissal, trust in the environmental performance of industry, and resource nationalism. For example, at the end of an interview, when we asked if there was anything more she'd like to add, the same elected official of a rural municipality quoted above in relation to climate dismissal talked at length about the negative impacts associated with oil wells on her farmland. At the time of interview, her land was undergoing a \$1 million clean-up due to an oil spill when the company found further salt water damage that had gone unreported for years. The interviewee, however, had already suspected the salt water contamination because her crop was thinner in that area. She expressed sympathy for the small oil company who owned the well, and wished to see them succeed, but highlighted the significant impact on her farm, and her concern that the salt water leak had not been detected earlier, despite that she voiced her suspicions.

When interviewees shared stories of oil's negative impacts with us, they reported not wanting to speak about these impacts in their communities for fear of, or experience with, being censured.



*Map of conductivity contours indicating salt water contamination in a farmer's field.*

This interviewee went on to highlight many nuisances and disturbances to her farm operation. These were all framed in an ambivalent way, that is in the broader context of valuing the industry's presence. For example, she stated:

We like the flares. In our yards, the H<sub>2</sub>S [hydrogen sulfide — a noxious gas that is produced alongside oil] — I shouldn't say we 'like' the flares, but we understand that they're necessary in the type of oil that is being produced where we live. We had some farmland about thirty miles from our home farm ... and we could leave a header [a machine for harvesting grain] in that north yard, and it could be there all summer. We can do the same thing to another header in our yard and you start to see rusting. We don't raise an issue with it, but we have to paint our bins on a fairly regular basis. There must just be that little bit of something in the air that causes rusting to happen a lot quicker.

The above response was typical of those who mentioned oil's negative impacts. Participants were careful to voice their numerous criticisms in a context of support for the industry. This is consistent with previous research conducted by Eaton and colleagues (Eaton and Kinchy, 2016 and Zink and Eaton, 2016) which shows that the industry is not without criticism in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities, but that grievances are not shared openly because of a pervasive culture of silence as well as a perceived lack of opportunity and community capacity for political mobilization.

Indeed, when interviewees shared stories of oil's negative impacts with us, they reported not wanting to speak about these impacts in their communities for fear of, or experience with, being censured. One interviewee, the owner of an oilfield related company, related the following example:





So here's an example: a woman I know ... she lives kind of on the edge of [town] and there's a couple of wells over here — she posted on Facebook 'is anybody smelling the rotten eggs? I can smell it in my yard and I had to go in the house.' So a few other people said 'yeah, I thought that was the sewer'. I said 'no, there's a well' and ... I said 'just call the Ministry of the Economy, [I] put his number'. That's all I said, but holy crap you would have thought I committed murder. The oil field guys came at me with a vengeance ... when you talk about keyboard warriors and online bullies and well, just horrible.

In another case, a farmer recounted his long struggle to have an oil company acknowledge and address the contamination of his well water with natural gas. It took seven years for the company to test and address the problem in the first place and then another 4 years until a permanent solution was implemented. This farmer reports being able to light gas on fire as it exited his kitchen tap and that his daughter, whose bedroom was in the basement next to the plumbing, has suffered severe health problems that he associates with the gas:

[B]ut our daughter whose bedroom was right there and kind of right beside — she's got headaches — she doesn't even live here anymore — but she's got health issues, but we can't say ... is it just her age? Or just because? Or that's the way life is? We've had her in ... she's seen naturopaths and had MRIs. But we tend to say it's due to this.

When we asked him if he talks about this experience to others in the community he replied "So we're very careful — well, we don't really talk about it and actually with you and [a graduate student doing research], that's the most I've talked about it, and there's a lot of speculation as to who does what." In order to have the well water remediated, he had to sign a non-disclosure agreement that keeps him from talking about his experience. His family still drinks bottled water.

In addition to 'online warriors' and non-disclosure agreements, silence is maintained because there seems to be no alternative economy and nearly everyone is tied to industry in some way. The following farmers explained that landowners who have experienced nuisances associated with the industry are reluctant to speak because they derive income from small contracts with the industry. One stated "A lot of them have companies that support the industry. They push snow; they do lots of work for the industry and all they've got to do is get toasted ..." while another agreed "They don't want to rock the boat, and it's a difficult personal decision, because to have that extra revenue on your farm is phenomenal ... Especially when there's drought and grasshoppers."

When things do go wrong, money is spent to keep people from speaking out as the following interviewee explained:

A local farmer ... lost nine of his calves — I think it was nine ... seven? ... And he lost all these calves and they sent him a cheque for whatever the cattle would have been worth as adults and made him happy. They've got little kids. They have grandkids out there. I'm thinking I would not have shot my mouth over repaying that. But it's very difficult here, because people are very well aware of who pays the bills. [Economic Development Officer]

This reluctance to "rock the boat" or make public space for frank discussion, extends even to institutions that, on first glance, would seem unrelated to oil. For example, when I approached a local gallery to give a talk as a way to report back to a community I had worked with on previous research, the gallery replied in an email that:

Your discussion would certainly go along with [a current exhibit] well. We just felt the subject could be viewed as political in nature. Our major sponsor for some upcoming renovations is an oil company and we don't want to offend anyone by the impression that it may be political. I think it is a very interesting subject and is good for opening discussion but sometimes those discussions can become lively or heated. We prefer to stick with just hosting artistic shows at this time.

Our broader research on oil industry influence in rural communities makes clear that there are very few institutions in these communities that are untouched by oil interests. These types of sponsorships and oil industry donations, as summarized in a forthcoming article, are part of the culture of silence that keeps people from voicing their real grievances about the impacts of oil.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> See Emily Eaton and Simon Enoch (in press) Oil's Rural Reach: Social Licence in Saskatchewan's Oil-Producing Communities. *Canadian Journal of Communication*.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

Climate science tells us there is an urgent need to transition away from fossil fuels. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that if we implement no new GHG emissions reduction strategies beyond what is currently in place global mean surface temperature in 2100 will increase to 3.7 to 4.8 degrees Celsius above average temperatures in 1850 -1900 (IPCC, 2014: 20). The prospects for limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius are bleak. According to McGlade and Ekins, the world's cumulative carbon emissions between 2011 and 2050 would need to be limited to 1,100 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide, while current fossil fuel reserves contain emissions roughly three times higher than this. Moreover, we have already blown past the IPCC's (2014: 20) start date of 2010 for limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius through a reduction of 40-70% of global anthropogenic GHG emissions below 2010 levels by 2050. If global temperatures rise above 2 degrees there will be pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems including increased extinction of species, the undermining of our food and fresh water security, increased hazards due to extreme weather events, the displacement of large numbers of people, increases in poverty, hunger, war, and economic shocks, among many other impacts (IPCC, 2014: 13-16).

Environmentalists and policy analysts have proposed numerous worthwhile strategies to kick start a transition away from fossil fuels. The International Network for Sustainable Energy, for example, has been working on reasonable scenarios for transitioning to renewable energy, and the European group has articulated a sustainable energy vision that would see a complete phase out of fossil and nuclear energy by 2040 in the 27 EU countries (INFORSE – Europe, 2011). There is no lack of knowledge about what needs to be done, but a wide gap exists between what we know we need to do and the pro-oil policies of the Saskatchewan government. Certainly, the fossil fuels sector applies enormous pressure on governments to continue their carbon-intensive economies, but in Saskatchewan the electorate in rural oil-producing areas also holds considerable sway. It is not possible to win an election without also winning rural ridings, and the oil-producing regions have voted overwhelmingly in favour of the right-wing Saskatchewan Party. The voices of people in oil-producing areas could very well change the landscape of carbon politics in the province. Yet, as this report has made clear, it is unlikely that these people and voices will be rallied behind what they perceive as urban environmentalist discourses of climate change or the carbon tax policies of Eastern politicians.

Instead, we propose that environmentalists and people living in rural oil-producing communities might find common ground by highlighting the real grievances (including environmental) that people have about oil's impacts in their communities. Previous research conducted by Eaton and colleagues (Zink and Eaton, 2016; Eaton and Kinchy, 2016; Carter and Eaton, 2016) has documented these grievances. They include concerns about the health impacts associated with living beside oil infrastructure, impacts on farm operations and animals, the degradation of

The voices of people in oil-producing areas could very well change the landscape of carbon politics in the province.

native prairie that many ranchers rely on for quality grazing, the contamination of well water, nuisances associated with increased traffic, noise, and dust and many more. If environmental and political groups began to foreground the concerns of those living amid oil they would begin to earn the trust of local people and break down the culture of silence. More people would be empowered to speak out if they knew that their neighbours were also suffering from similar impacts. The importance of highlighting local grievances is consistent with the role that local concerns have played in driving the resistance and opposition to fossil fuel and pipeline expansion in British Columbia and Alberta where tanker traffic, pipeline spills, First Nations sovereignty, community democracy, and local health impacts have been front and centre.

But simply amplifying the voices and grievances of rural oil-producing people will not be enough. The strident defence of the oil industry, despite its impacts, is fuelled by insecurity about the possibility of viable alternatives that can support people to stay in the communities that they call home. So far, politicians have offered no plausible alternatives for rural development in Saskatchewan. Instead, since the 1980s, governments (both 'right' and 'left', provincial and federal) have introduced policies that make rural areas more vulnerable to large capital and the vagaries of international markets while undermining social safety nets. We have seen the destruction of the Canadian Wheat Board, the Crow Rate, incursions by large capital through intellectual property into the seed industry, the decline of farm support programmes and much more (National Farmers Union, 2009). These policies and trajectories have made farming virtually impossible for all but the largest corporate farmers. Seeing few alternatives to the oil economy, people defend what they have.

One farmer that we interviewed for this research suggested that "In Saskatchewan and Regina you need a political party with members that are inclined to a transition — not a destruction and 'end oil today' but a transition. Right now ... they stay very focused on the oil industry." Such an approach might, indeed, be feasible, even in the heart of Saskatchewan Party territory. As the owner of a non-oilfield small business suggested "a lot of small-c conservatives still have the community in mind; they're interested in not fucking things over so badly that the next generation has nothing. And these are usually good entry points with people that you can establish a common ground and then have some fairly good discussions about what's happening." These insights are crucial for both environmental organizations/activists and politicians. If we are to navigate our way through the climate impasse and have any hope of rescuing a liveable world, climate change activists and policymakers will need to speak not only to those who already agree with them. Instead, they will need to engage the communities whose livelihoods are on the line and offer them a plan for a transition they can believe in.

Generalized talk about alternatives will remain threatening for oil-producing communities. Instead, detailed, local-level work identifying specific ways forward and assessing economic and jobs implications is needed. There are certainly opportunities for good jobs in the renewable energy sectors, and those need to be developed at the community level and supported through government subsidies with the recognition that Saskatchewan boasts some of the best solar profiles and wind speeds in the country. But agriculture is also central to rural life and livelihood, so policymakers will need to radically remake rural agriculture in ways that support families and young farmers, not just large agri-business. This could be done by harnessing opportunities for linking local production to consumption, supporting younger generations to take up farming, providing cooperative and communal access to land and equipment, and investing in ecological agriculture extension and supports. Should comprehensive programs be outlined for renewable energy and agriculture in rural areas, it may just be enough for people to make the leap.

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