

Communicating Climate Change and Energy in Alberta

When communicating with people in Alberta about climate change, *who is speaking and the way they speak* play an outsized role in whether the message is accepted or even considered. This document provides tools and information to approach conversations about climate constructively, based in shared values and respect for audiences with different backgrounds and perspectives.

The Alberta Narratives Project

The Alberta Narratives project is a community-based initiative to seek ways of talking about climate and energy that reflect the shared values and identities of Albertans. It brought together more than 75 individuals and organizations and engaged a broad range of 500 Albertans including artists, business, energy and faith leaders, environmentalists, farmers, new Canadians, oil sands workers, policy makers, youth, and many more. The following findings draw on insights from this work.

Key Findings: Approaches for successful communications

Build language around people's values and identity

People's identity, values and group loyalties are most often the basis for their positions on climate change and energy. In a province where so many work in oil and gas, many Albertans feel under attack in climate conversations.

Effective communication begins with respect and a recognition of your audience's identity—the qualities and beliefs that make a person or group different from others—**and with their values.** Values are the things we care about and are inextricably linked to emotions. While a particular value might be important to one person, it may be unimportant to another.

TIME FOR STRAIGHT TALK.

Use simple language that presents clear options, and that acknowledges uncertainty and challenges.

Techno-jargon, expressions used to downplay touchy subjects and slogans (including "emissions," "carbon," and their derivatives) are generally disliked.

State common ground and values from the outset

Recognizing the many things on which we agree forms an important foundation for conversation. When we share our different views and ideas, it helps to emphasize how much we still have in common. People respond more positively to cooperative rather than combative language.

Trusted messengers are critical to success

People are more likely to listen to communicators who reflect their identity and values. Some Albertans are distrustful of the main sources of information on climate change, including government, environmentalists, and the media. **The most effective messenger is one who is already part of the audience's community.**

Remove absolutes

All, everyone, every, only, never, none, the best, the worst, have to, and must—sweeping or high-handed words like these are very likely to turn people off from a climate change conversation, regardless of their identity.

Recommended narratives for communicators when talking about...

... *climate change in Alberta*

Climate change has a low profile in Alberta and is not widely seen to be an immediate or pressing problem. Albertans' attitudes to climate change closely reflect their political values and personal connections to the oil and gas industry; however, there is diversity of opinion across all groups. Most accept that the weather is changing, but are split about, or unaware of, the cause. People are dissatisfied with the current public discourse and rarely talk about climate change.

DO

- **Increase engagement, education and “climate literacy.”** Use simple and practical language.
- **Break the political polarization—** until a broad consensus is achieved, it will not be possible to maintain enduring climate policy in Alberta.
- **Support new trusted communicators.** There is an urgent need for new advocates drawn from different communities that are harder to reach.
- **Recognize the diversity of views in all audiences** and allow them to be expressed openly.
- **Enable a new conversation.** Provide resources to support concerned people who want to talk about climate change in their community.
- **Keep climate change in the mix and concentrate on adaptation and solutions.** Identify how climate change will affect people's lives and livelihoods, and how they might best protect their communities.
- **Recognize the facts and move on to positive solutions.** Acknowledge the challenges and causes but move quickly to practical solutions and the positive narrative of Alberta as a place of opportunity that builds.
- **Frame climate change as an emerging challenge.** Most people accept that the weather is changing, but see these changes as manageable.

DON'T

- Assume that people understand the causes, solutions, and imminence of climate change, or its likely impacts on their lives.
- Invoke a “Made in Alberta” climate change policy. This confrontational and anti-Canadian framing was rejected by many people.
- Make sweeping generalizations about what “Albertans” are, do, believe, and so on.
- Invoke tribalism or use language that sets one group against another.
- Send communicators from outside the community; they are less likely to be trusted.
- Focus entirely on the benefits of renewables without mentioning climate change.
- Frame climate change as the most important issue we face.
- Assign “responsibility” or “fault” to certain groups or sectors, or deny or diminish the role played by the oil and gas industry. Either extreme can be counter-productive.
- Describe climate change as a huge and immediate threat.

Recommended narratives for communicators when talking about...

... oil and gas in Alberta

Most people in Alberta have a strong personal or family connection with the oil and gas industry. Their main concerns about oil and gas relate to insecurity and dependence, not climate change.

DO

- **Recognize and be grateful for the contribution of the oil and gas workers:** their contributions to Alberta's prosperity are valued across the province.
- **Focus on vulnerability and security first, and climate change second.** Climate change is best mentioned as one of the main factors affecting the future viability of the oil and gas industries.
- **Adopt a balanced yet critical evaluation of the costs and benefits of oil and gas.**

DON'T

- Start the conversation with judgement and blame, putting the audience on the defensive.
- Identify climate change and environmental destruction as the main problem with oil and gas. **Don't use pipeline politics as an entry point for discussing climate change.**¹
- Praise the oil and gas sector uncritically. This approach is highly polarizing.

... Albertan identity

Finding new ways to talk about climate change in Alberta requires speaking to the identity and experience people hold in common. Four aspects of Alberta identity were commonly shared:

- Alberta has a great quality of life and environment
- Alberta builds
- Alberta is a place where "things can happen"
- Albertans support each other

DO

- **Express gratitude for life in Alberta.** People see Alberta as a good place to live, work and raise a family.
- **Draw on the shared values and strengths of Alberta** as a province that builds, where people support each other, and with an exceptional natural environment. Include a vision for sectors beyond oil and gas.
- **Base communications on examples and experience,** for example the speed and skill of developing previous energy resources.

DON'T

- Use language of Albertan exceptionalism or clichés. Claims of "the best environmental legislation" were particularly seen as inauthentic.
- Focus excessively on oil and gas, which leads people in other sectors to feel excluded and marginalized.
- Make sweeping generalizations about what "Albertans" are, do, believe, and so on.

¹Note: Alberta Narratives Project workshops were conducted in spring 2018, and views regarding pipelines may have evolved in the time since then.

Recommended narratives for communicators when talking about...

... renewables and transition in Alberta

Many Albertans believe that demand for oil will continue for the next generation and further. But people agree that developing renewable energy can provide new opportunities for work, innovation and enterprise, and could even be Alberta's next big energy boom.

DO

ADOPT A TRANSITION NARRATIVE...

... that describes a real diversification.

- Focus beyond activities that depend on oil and gas.

... within which all people feel valued.

- Include opportunities for other sectors like agriculture, tourism, education, etc.

... that builds on Albertan strengths.

- *Continuation*, not transformation. New industries will build on existing skills Alberta's workforce already has.

... that is more than just a "transition."

- Explore alternative terms including *rebuilding, restructuring, or evolving*.

... that continues a process that is already underway.

- Focus on the rapid growth of renewable energy, especially in the last 10 years.

... in which all people can debate long-term choices.

- A positive conversation about options for the future and freedom to choose.

... about making a steady transition toward something new (rather than away from something old).

- A positive, forward-looking vision will generate new and broader engagement.

Transition narratives should also include:

- Acknowledging that this will not be easy

USE A CONVENTIONAL "TRANSITION" NARRATIVE THAT...

... asserts the dangers of climate change.

- For many Albertans, the greatest threat of climate change is to their livelihoods.

... criticizes the oil industry.

- Most Albertans have a personal connection to the oil industry.

... asserts that we must reduce or end fossil fuel production.

- This argument is viewed as unrealistic and economically devastating.

... strongly relies on an economic case for expanding renewable energy.

- Renewables simply cannot replace the revenue from fossil fuel exports.

Additional narratives that were rejected include:

- Alberta can be a leader on climate change
- This is the only way
- This will be easy (eco-boosterism)

DON'T

To learn more

This information sheet summarizes the findings of Alberta Narratives Project Report I—*Communicating Climate Change and Energy in Alberta*. To download this report, or Report II—*Communicating Climate Change and Energy with Different Audiences in Alberta*, visit <https://albertanarrativesproject.ca/>.