

FACT SHEET

Project Summary: Incorporating Ecosystem Services into the Environmental Assessment Process

What is This Project About?

The environmental assessment process was designed to protect stakeholder interests while allowing industrial development to occur on the landscape in a sustainable way. The process is a repeatable, transparent approach that tracks biophysical responses in the natural environment generated by resource development. It encourages sustainable development and helps ensure land use trade-offs are considered in the decision-making process. Its design gives proponents the confidence needed to identify and mitigate environmental impacts, where appropriate. While the current assessment process is a proven practice, a literature review, interviews with regulators, and proponents and a review of previously approved EIAs, identified opportunities for improvement. Understanding these helped recognize where an ecosystem service approach may add value to the decision-making process. The project aims to outline the scale of opportunity and value of including ecosystem services (ES) in an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process. A Gap Analysis and interviews with regulators and proponents outlined opportunities, risks, and barriers of including ES in the process. As a part of the project a document entitled "Guiding Principles for a Draft Framework" was developed which discussed and outlined in further detail how ecosystem services could be incorporated into the EIA process.

How is this Work Relevant to ES Market Innovation?

Ecosystem service assessments help link the impacts a management alternative will have on the benefits people derive from nature (i.e. ecosystem service benefits). These assessments can also identify and track project dependencies on the ecosystem.

FACT SHEET

Incorporating ecosystem services in EIA the process may:

- Improve stakeholder engagement by moving it to the forefront of the assessment process
- Help scope what stakeholder groups will be engaged at the beginning of the process by assessing the flow of benefits to beneficiaries
- Modify who is engaged throughout the process by mapping the flow of benefits in the region to identify relevant beneficiaries and stakeholders
- Change the way engagement sessions are framed by asking stakeholders what ecosystem services are highly valued in the region, learn how they interact with nature, and how they would be impacted by the proposed project
- Manage cumulative effects by estimating the supply and demand of high priority ecosystem services
- Improve communication efforts and enable language that is easily understood

Who Does this Project Impact?

Throughout the project, proponents and regulators were engaged through the interview process and in follow up discussions. A framework which incorporates ecosystem services into the environmental assessment process may reduce risk, potentially reduce time and cost, and may increase social license for proponents seeking to gain approval for project development. In addition, ecosystem service concepts may be able to identify impacted areas, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities more effectively and efficiently as well as help to avoid and mitigate more high priority impacts according to values shared by stakeholders and Indigenous communities.

How Does this Work Support the ESNB Vision?

The environmental assessment process was designed to protect stakeholder interests while allowing industrial development to occur on the landscape in a sustainable way. Where this project delivers is by helping regulators and proponents understand how an ecosystem service lens could improve stakeholder engagement and connecting the biophysical changes on the landscape to opportunities offered by the ecosystem which stakeholders value.

FACT SHEET

This opportunity is well placed to help with the ESN vision of enabling Alberta's green economy through the efficient use of natural resources. A significant portion of the research involved in this project focuses on improved stakeholder engagement. This project aims to leverage other ESN learnings by improving the process for project proponents, regulators, stakeholders, and Indigenous communities. This supports both the fifth Strategic Goal of the ESN; "ESN has active partners and at least one champion per major sector", and the seventh Strategic Goal of having "market tools which are aligned and support stakeholder needs, challenges, and opportunities".