

Mobile Work in the Straits and South Coast

Findings from research conducted by the Community Impacts Team of the *On the Move Partnership* in Newfoundland and Labrador

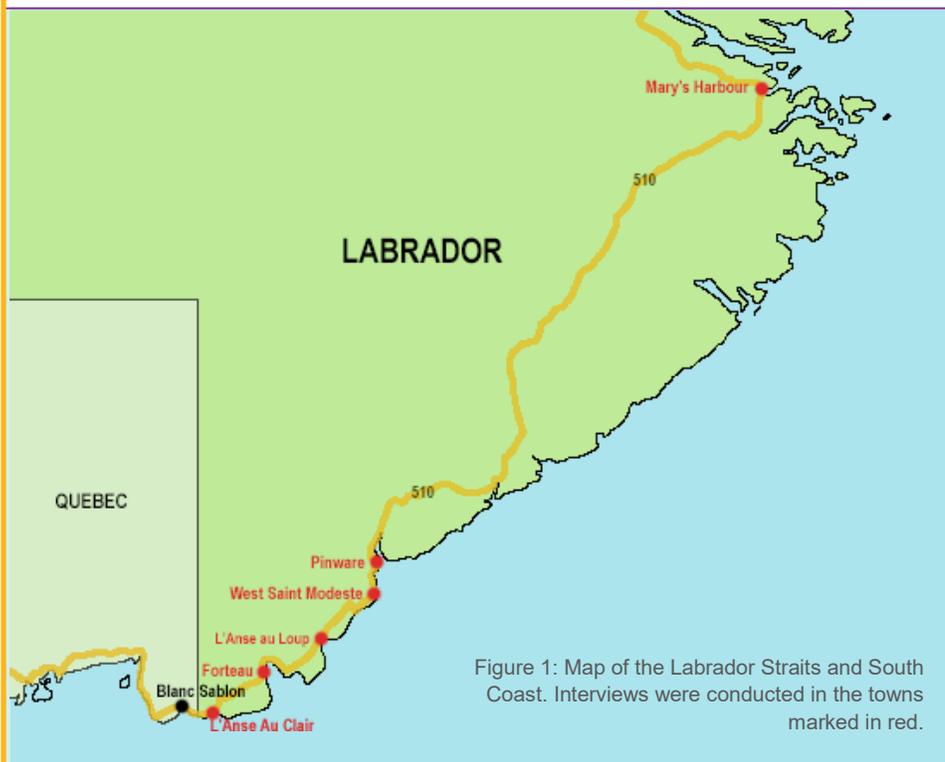
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What is Mobile Work?

Employment-related geographic mobility (E-RGM), or mobile work, involves long-distance commuting across municipal, provincial, or national boundaries to get to and from a place of work. Mobile workers can travel to their place of work by car, bus, or plane, and may commute daily or remain at their place of work for weeks or months at a time. E-RGM also includes multiple or transient worksites, as in the case of homecare workers, and mobile workplaces, such as cargo ships, trains, planes, trucks and fishing vessels (Temple Newhook et al., 2011).

The Community Impacts component of the *On the Move Partnership* sought to identify: 1) how communities are impacted by E-RGM, 2) how various actors have responded to these impacts, and 3) the influence of context (e.g. legislation, corporate policies, proximity to worksite, labour policies, etc.) on E-RGM and related impacts and responses.

Results from the Community Impacts component are based on 182 semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants and mobile workers in Newfoundland and Labrador from 2012 to 2018. 28 interviews were conducted in Labrador, 12 of which came from key informants in the Labrador Straits and South Coast regions.



Mobile Work in the Labrador Straits and South Coast

Findings suggest the **Labrador Straits and South Coast regions are mostly source regions**, having mobile workers residing permanently in their communities. Key informants suggested that mobile work beyond the fisheries was not especially common prior to the Muskrat Falls Hydro project, though there were some individuals commuting to the Canadian Territories, Voisey's Bay, Alberta and Ontario for employment. However, key informants reported that once Muskrat Falls began, more individuals chose to engage with E-RGM to work at the project and many exist-

ing mobile workers chose to work at Muskrat Falls instead of out of province.

The Straits region was also a host region in 2015-2016. Straits communities saw mobile workers come in to install powerlines that will send electricity from Muskrat Falls to Newfoundland once the project is complete. A temporary camp was set up in L'Anse au Loup to house workers. Many communities saw company vehicles (sometimes loaded with machinery) pass through on their way to the project.

It was suggested that mobile workers employed at Muskrat Falls, Voisey's Bay and out of province commuted by airplane from the airport at Blanc Sablon, Quebec. Some companies had charter flights arranged departing from Blanc Sablon. Shifts for workers varied by their place of work, but workers at Muskrat often worked 2 weeks on, 1 week off. Workers employed in offshore fisheries commuted by boat to the waters of Northern Labrador and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Interviewees explained that these individuals were away from home for 4 to 6 months at a time.

How has mobile work impacted communities in the Labrador Straits and South Coast?

Study participants noted several changes in the Labrador Straits and South Coast regions that they believed were the result of E-RGM. These impacts have been grouped into the following categories: Economic, Infrastructure and Service, Social-Cultural, Sustainability, Planning and Governance, and Environmental

Economic

Key informants reported that individuals of various ages have chosen to engage with mobile work, but especially younger workers (just out of school) and older workers (approaching retirement). It was suggested that younger workers might be attracted to the project because of the high wages and opportunities for completing apprenticeship training in a relatively short amount of time. It was suggested that older workers were drawn to work at Muskrat Falls because the wages being offered at would allow them to save a considerable amount of money for their retirement. Due to an arrangement between Nalcor and the Innu Nation in Labrador, the project has also hired a significant number of Indigenous workers. It was suggested by key informants that the project was a great employment opportunity for Innu in the province; however, fears were also expressed about the future employability of these individuals, some of whom acquired jobs through the agreement without formal apprenticeship training. Local businesses in the Straits reported that they had lost workers to Muskrat Falls due to higher wages being offered at the project. Some businesses chose to participate in the temporary foreign worker program as a result.

It was also suggested that mobile workers have higher incomes than most residents employed locally in the Straits and South Coast. Many participants feared that the lifestyles afforded by wages at Muskrat Falls would leave many mobile workers in debt once they are laid off and the project completed. Communities feared that mobile workers, and younger workers especially, were not doing enough long-term and financial planning. This resulted in spending on items like recreational vehicles and trucks that they would not be able to afford once their employment at Muskrat Falls ended.

According to key informants many mobile workers were buying and renovating existing homes and cabins and spending money locally on building supplies for these projects. However, participants had mixed feelings about the impact of mobile work on business development. According to some, Muskrat Falls has done little in terms of new business development – most products used come from wholesalers on the Island and camp accommodations mean little money is spent on local businesses. However, others suggested that some businesses have benefitted from mobile work including hotels, general

contractors hired by Nalcor and businesses that sell recreational vehicles. Many companies have had to increase wages to compete with wages being offered at Muskrat Falls and also raise the price of goods and services to make up for those costs.

I had a fellow in St. John's calling me to say he just got an email...your [hotel] room is gone...we've let the room out to contractors. Sorry, your room isn't available anymore.

According to key informants, mobile work, particularly at the Muskrat Falls project, has also impacted the tourism sector in the Straits Region. In addition to damage to the road between Blanc Sablon and Red Bay (discussed further in Infrastructure and Service impacts), it was suggested that some hotel owners chose to rent their rooms out to mobile workers and Nalcor executives for significant periods of time. According to key informants some hotels even cancelled prior bookings made by visitors to the region so that reservations for mobile workers could be made. Key informants feared that negative comments made online and spread by word of mouth could be damaging to the tourism sector in the Labrador Straits long-term.

Infrastructure and Service

Key informants in the Straits noted that the roads has been impacted by transport trucks carrying heavy equipment to and from Muskrat Falls project sites. This resulted in large potholes along the extent of highway 510 in 2017. Company vehicles in the Straits were also reported to have increased traffic on roads in the region and on the ferry from Newfoundland. Some key informants suggested that the state of the roads coupled with increased traffic had generated substantial safety concerns, with some Straits residents opting not to leave their homes unless necessary.



Figure 3: Potholes on highway 510 in Forteau NL, July 2017.

Social-Cultural

According to key informants, an influx of money from mobile work changed community dynamics in Straits communities. For instance, it was suggested that disparities in income between mobile and non-mobile workers in communities had contributed to a sense of inequity. It was also suggested that mobile workers were less likely to volunteer in their home communities because they would rather spend time with their families when they are off work. In addition, key informants observed that the partners of mobile workers often chose not to work because their partner made enough working away to sustain the family. It was thought that this lack of involvement might further challenge already strained regional and community capacities. It was also feared that increased wealth among families coupled with exposure of individuals to drugs while on the worksite meant that more drugs were being introduced into the region.

Sustainability

Participants had mixed feelings about the impacts of E-RGM on the sustainability of the Labrador Straits and South Coast regions. Many agreed that in the short-term, employment at the Muskrat Falls project was helping individuals, families, local businesses and communities economically. It also provided an opportunity for young people living in the region to work in the region to sustain some communities. However, participants were also concerned about the long-term impacts of Muskrat Falls. Key informants were concerned that their communities would see few benefits from the project upon its completion. One interviewee stated: “the reality is....we’re not even going to get any power from [the project].” It was also suggested that very little discussion or planning for after Muskrat Falls was being done, though rumours of another project at Gull Island have emerged.

I think [Muskrat Falls] is the biggest waste of money we ever had. I don't like how the Aboriginal people are being treated...But I don't know what we would have done without it. I don't know where my husband would be. I don't know where any of [the workers] would be.

Fears were also expressed about Muskrat Falls creating a ‘false economy’ in the Straits and South Coast that would cease to exist upon its completion. For instance, key informants were concerned that individuals making high wages at Muskrat Falls currently would have trouble adapting their lifestyles and spending habits once the project was completed and they were laid off. This was coupled with fears that young people in the region might be encouraged to move outside of the province for employment, especially those in specialized trades once jobs at Muskrat Falls no longer exist, thereby

threatening the sustainability of these regions.

Planning and Governance

It was suggested by participants that community and regional development and governance in their communities had been impacted by the number of people in the Straits and South Coast regions working away. According to some key informants in the Straits, mobile workers in their communities were less inclined or able to volunteer or run for council. It was felt that this might affect the ability of communities to plan and develop economically.

Many key informants felt that Nalcor operations had created tensions between the company and communities as well as exacerbated existing tensions between communities in the Straits. It was suggested that regional planning was already a challenge due to competition between communities. In the context of Muskrat Falls, communities chose to negotiate independently with Nalcor instead of together as a region.

Participants feared that the long-term legacy of the Muskrat Falls project overall would not be positive and that tensions related to the project would continue after its completion, hindering regional cooperation. In contrast, key informants spoke positively of relationships forged with Vale. In the South Coast, it was felt that mobile workers from the region would continue to be employed at the nickel mine Voisey’s Bay and that positive relations with Vale would continue.

Environmental

Participants suggested that waste generated from the Muskrat Falls project was becoming a problem for the Straits region. According to local key informants, Nalcor said during the environmental assessment process that they planned to remove project-related waste from the Straits by barge (out of Forteau); however, key informants suggested that this promise was not being honoured and that local landfills are now at capacity.

Engagement with E-RGM was also suggested as having an impact on the ability of individuals to get out on the land. According to participants in the South Coast region, rotational schedules did not allow some individuals to hunt, trap, or fish, during designated seasons because there either wasn't enough time during their home rotation to do so or, by the time their home rotation began, the season was well in and few animals were left to be caught. There were also fears that land torn up for installing powerlines would not be rehabilitated by Nalcor or contracted companies and that this may have negative environmental impacts.



Figure 4: Land cleared as part of the Muskrat Falls project, July 2017.

How have actors responded to the impacts of mobile work at the local level?

Responses to the challenges presented by E-RGM in the South Coast and Straits region have been taken up by community organizations, business owners, and res-

idents. Communities with mobile workers on council have chosen to be flexible with their meeting times to ensure meetings happen when those mobile workers are at home. Independent business owners have responded to hiring and wage challenges by either increasing their employee wages (to stay competitive) or participating in the temporary foreign worker (TFW) program. One hotel owner responded to demand for worker accommodations by purchasing pre-fabricated camp housing. This housing was installed next to their hotel, separate from regular hotel accommodations, and used to house workers as needed. Straits residents expressed dissatisfaction with the condition of the Trans-Labrador highway in the Straits region by creating a group on Facebook. 200 individuals also participated in a protest in L'Anse au Clair in July 2017.

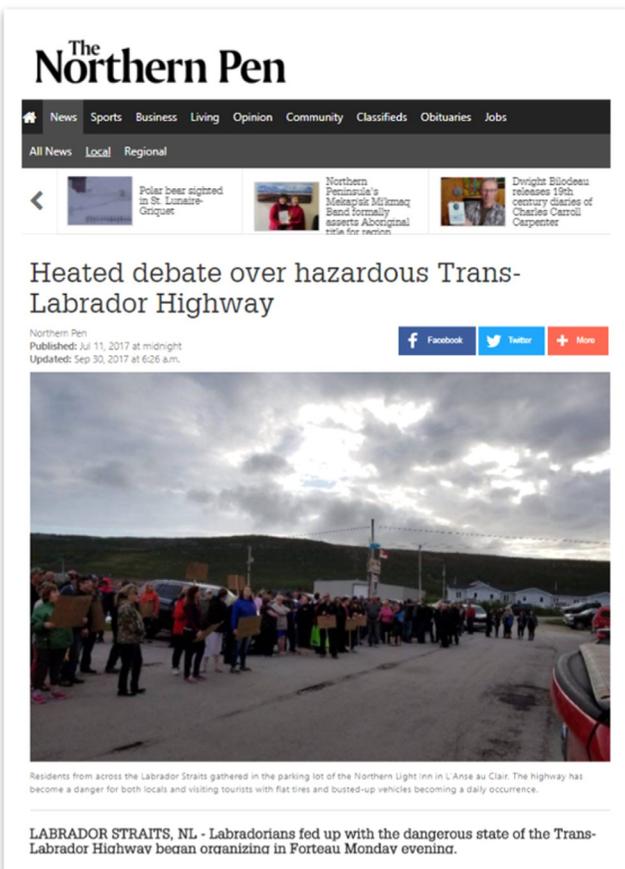


Figure 3: Article by the Northern Pen reporting on July 2017 protest in L'Anse au Clair

What else could be done to help Straits and South Coast communities adapt to the presence of mobile workers?

Key informants in the Straits suggested that increased inter-community collaboration in the region would help them better plan for and derive benefits from large projects like Muskrat Falls, including the presence of mobile workers. For example, corporate-community benefit agreements developed together, rather than in isolation, may have helped the Straits region in the development of strategies for waste management and road maintenance. Key informants also felt that more should have been done to assist employees at Muskrat Falls with financial planning and related skills so that the economic benefits of the project for individuals would be more meaningful in the long-term.



About the *On the Move Partnership*

The *On the Move Partnership* is a Canadian research project with international links investigating workers' extended travel and related absence from their places of permanent residence for the purpose of, and as part of, their employment. It is a project of the SafetyNet Centre for Occupational Health & Safety Research at Memorial University and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Research Development Corporation of NL (RDC), the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), and several universities and partners. For more information, please visit www.onthemovepartnership.ca.

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