

# Trust not always a good thing

December 7 2010, By Bev Betkowski

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Citizen groups acting as consultants to industry would do well to hold onto a little healthy mistrust to keep debate and critical thinking alive, says a University of Alberta researcher.

After studying public advisory committees in the forestry sector, professor John Parkins concluded that in some cases, high levels of trust led to familiarity and apathy on the part of [citizens](#) entrusted with representing the public's interests.

Parkins, a researcher in the Department of Rural Economy at the U of A, hopes his findings will give businesses and industry a fresh understanding of what makes citizen committees effective.

“Meaningful public engagement involves more than bringing like-minded people together for regular meetings. It is also important to understand how ‘group think’ emerges within these groups over time.

“Trust isn’t always a good thing, if it erodes the desire—especially of long-term groups—to deliberate and to question resource management plans,” Parkins added.

Parkins’ 10-month comparative study of sample advisory committees in Alberta’s forest industry revealed that the familiarity of group members and a gradual build up of [trust](#) tended to “dampen the quality of discussion, the vigorousness of debate and the range of issues and ideas under consideration,” he said.

There are more than 200 public advisory committees in the forest sector across Canada, so it is important to understand how these groups function, since they are held up as a key tool for public influence over the management of public lands in Canada, he added.

The study, which was published in a recent issue of *Society and Natural Resources*, found that when committee members shared a long history of regular meetings and a common pool of knowledge, the meetings lacked public-spiritedness and a connection to the big picture of forest management in Alberta.

In one of the groups studied, many of its members had worked together for more than a decade, and had overlapping personal and professional relationships with one another and with forest company representatives. “With high levels of familiarity, debates about regional forest management were not a priority. Members simply trusted local forest managers to do the right thing,” Parkins noted.

He recommends that industries seek out a wider range of public interests for their committees and include members with strong advocacy positions; committee members should be invited to organize and lead meetings, and there should be term limits or rotating membership on the committee.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Trust not always a good thing (2010, December 7) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-12-good.html>

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