Parallel Sessions

These sessions represented a new, three-part approach to interaction within the RE$EARCH Money conference. The session moderator reviewed the challenges identified on the previous day. Then participants broke up into groups to consider specific strategies to tackle those challenges.. Finally, each group reported back on their conclusions to the group as a whole.

Strand A: Driving Innovation through Canada's natural resources advantage

Facilitator:

Anne-Marie Thompson, Director of the Energy, Environment and Resources Division, Research Partnerships Directorate, NSERC

Panelists:

Catherine Cobden, Executive Vice President, Forest Products Association of Canada
Kevin Kuchta, Director, Product Development, Qwantech
Lola Piché, Director of Technical Services & Innovations, North Rim
Alison Sunstrum, Co-CEO, GrowSafe Systems Ltd.

Based on the previous day's discussion, two challenges were identified as the target for solutions to be proposed in this session. Those challenges were:

— an effective solution for increasing the capacity of the Canadian innovation ecosystem to understanding the needs and pain points of Canadian industries.
— an effective solution for enhancing the added value for all interested parties in natural resource development.

Representatives of each discussion group subsequently presented their conclusions.

With regard to increasing the innovation ecosystem's understanding of industry requirements, one discussion group proposed investing in organizations that would foster communication between these key stakeholders. Industry associations may be one of the easiest places to start, since they are already poised for such dialogue. As a representative of just such an association, Catherine Cobden acknowledged the pre-existing channels between the forestry sector and the research community; however, she added that it might be legitimate for researchers to demand more from this relationship, in order to set clearer goals. When this concept was expanded to a more specific proposal of workshops that might be mounted by such an association, Alison Sunstrum acknowledged that she liked the idea of such workshops in principle, but worried that they might not yield any specific result of interest to her firm. "I'm really looking for a tangible outcome," she said. "If you had a series of case studies, some best practices, some amazing failures, and some other things, I'm going to really learn from that workshop."

Another discussion group raised the need to bring project partners closer together in order to resolve conflicts that often surface between shorter, highly focused time lines of industry and the longer, open ended agendas often adopted by academic research groups. Cobden agreed with this assessment and echoed a suggestion to break down any barriers that would prevent partners from establishing a common pace and set of objectives. "There's nothing industry hates more than silos," she said. "Working across partnerships to break silos, so that they feel there's efficiencies and effectiveness is very helpful." Kevin Kuchta offered the specific example of the overwhelming abundance of sources where industry might be expected to seek out the latest technical developments, which can lead to fruitless interactions with inappropriate partners. For just this reason, Web-based information should be as clear as possible to avoid this kind of problem.

A third group tackled this same question of information overload, arguing that it stems from a lack of necessary work that should be done prior to formal interactions between industry and researchers, which could include academic groups as well as smaller businesses that are bringing their own proposed solution to a larger client. Bringing these groups together as early as possible was deemed essential, so that the

researchers could be certain of just what their prospective partners require of them. Sunstrum praised this framing of the situation: “You handled a two-way technology transfer,” she said. Cobden likewise praised the discussion of incentives for researchers to accelerate their activities, which will be essential to optimizing the results on both sides.

With regard to enhancing the added value of natural resource development, it was suggested that community engagement in these activities should be promoted as early as possible. While partnerships between academic researchers, industry representatives, and government were regarded as necessary in this process, there was a cautionary note sounded against the notion that government officials might be picking winners and losers as part of this process. Panelists then asked for more details about how this kind of engagement would take place, such as communities engaging in outreach campaigns to attract the attention of forest companies looking to locate a new facility. Such initiatives could open up a dialogue so that the terms of such a venture could be as beneficial as possible to both the community and the company. Another aspect of this interaction was the possibility of establishing environmental credentials in areas such as safety or sustainability. Such credentials represent another kind of value added, which assigns the resulting products a premium status that can be priced higher and still find a ready market. This can obviously provide natural resource firms with some competition, but it can likewise be an element of making this industry an attractive addition to a community.

By way of conclusion, Cobden pointed to a crucial distinction between collaborative and competitive work, which must be acknowledged in any partnership, especially when the members include newer, smaller firms that may be growing rapidly with outstanding products or services. Lola Piché noted that there is often much more than a specific product being commercialized, but also the development of personnel and technical capabilities. “There’s a lot of room for transfer of knowledge in different ways as well,” she said.