

NECHAKO REGION: AGRICULTURE PROFILE



Key Features

- The Nechako region is comprised of a wide range of topography, with significant differences in climatic conditions.
- Agricultural activity is predominantly ranching and hay production, which takes place largely in the flat river valleys.
- The region raises feeder cattle (weaned calves sent directly to feedlots) for transport to southern BC and Alberta.
- Cereal grain, pulses, and oilseed production has increased significantly in recent years.
- Precipitation varies throughout the region, with a trend of increasing rainfall towards coastal areas in the west.
- Annual precipitation: 464 to 522mm.
- Frost-free days: 52 to 90 (varies significantly, depending on specific area and geography).

2016 Census of Agriculture	
Population	38,636
Land in the Agriculture Land Reserve (ALR)	373,544 ha
Total Farmland Area	245,379 ha
Number of Farms	747
Total Salaries/Wages *	\$7,153,306
Gross Farm Receipts	\$63.2 million
Total Farm Capital	\$1.05 billion

**Source: 2016, Census of Agriculture and Tax Linkage, Statistics Canada*

The Nechako Region

The Nechako region extends from the centre of the province up to the Yukon border. The second largest development region in BC, containing 20.8% of the provincial land area, it is also the least populated, with only 0.8% of the province's population. The majority of the population lives in communities along the rail-highway corridor from Smithers in the northwest to Vanderhoof in the southeast. A primary transportation link between these communities is Highway 16, running east-west.

This region is an area of vast and remote wilderness that includes mountains, glaciers, valleys, and plateaus. The terrain is composed of a high, rolling, or hilly plateau that is bound by rugged mountains on the west and northeastern borders. There is little or no commercial forest cover in the northern half, but forests are extensive in the south, where they support a significant part of the local economy. The mining industry has traditionally provided the economic base in the towns of Atlin, Dease Lake, and Fraser Lake. Several major salmon rivers originate in the Nechako.

Land

The Nechako region covers an area of 19,202,453 hectares, and approximately 1.9% (373,544 hectares) of the land is in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). This represents 8.1% of the total ALR in the province. About 55,000 hectares of land are cultivated, and the main crop is forage for beef and dairy herds. The majority of the agricultural activity occurs in the river valleys, where the land is plentiful and relatively flat, and the soil is fertile.

Agriculture

The major farming areas in the region are located in the west (Bulkley Valley) and the east (Nechako Valley), where land, business, and organizations support diverse agricultural activities. Beef cattle ranching has increased dramatically in the Nechako region since the late 1970's, and new land has been cleared for crop production. The region contributed about 1% to BC's total grain and oilseed production in 2016.

Short season crops are also grown here, with the majority of field crops produced near the city of Vanderhoof in the southeast.

In 2016, the 747 farms in the Nechako region generated sales of about \$63.2 million, from an investment of almost \$1.05 billion in land, livestock, buildings, and machinery. The majority of the gross farm receipts in the region are from beef cattle ranching and hay farming, with the remainder coming from dairy, other livestock, grains, fruits and vegetables, and other commodities. The region produces nearly all of its own dairy and poultry.

The winter feeding period for cattle, lasting from mid-November to mid-May, results in high feed costs for ranchers in this region. There is a growing movement for in-season fruits and vegetables and locally grown food products, so direct farm sales are increasing. Producers in the Nechako region wanting to sell to larger markets, such as the Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley or Kamloops, face higher transportation costs than producers further south. This high cost of shipping commodities to outside markets and the region's own small local market are both limiting factors to increasing production in the area.



Photo courtesy of Wayne Ray — cows in the field

In spite of these challenges, there is potential for growth in the agriculture sector in this region. There are emerging opportunities in value-added agriculture ventures utilizing local production, such as a recent start-up of a small feed mill in Smithers that produces their own grain, mills it, and bags it for sale to market. The demand for locally produced vegetables exceeds production, and there are underutilized productive lands that could be used to meet this need. Local farmers' markets facilitate marketing and distribution, which strongly contributes to the viability and success of smaller operations. Low population densities in the region mean that such enterprises could operate with little or no competition.

One advantage that the Nechako region has over the southern regions of BC is the relatively low cost of land. However, agricultural land close to the growing communities of Vanderhoof, Smithers, and Terrace is facing significant pressure from an increasing demand in the residential housing market.

Ranchers continue to work with the forestry industry to open up new rangeland for grazing. Vegetative growth in clear cuts is quite vigorous, and many of the plants provide good grazing for cattle.

The Prince Rupert grain port is a significant terminal for grain exports from across Canada and, in the future, may offer good access for commodities produced in this region.

Food Processing

Food and beverage processing in the Nechako region is limited. However, as the agriculture industry expands and the population grows, there may be opportunities to process and sell more locally, especially given the high costs to transport goods to larger markets outside of the region. There are four provincially licensed meat plants in the region.

Selected Crop and Livestock Inventories (2016 Census)

For detailed statistics for the Nechako Region, see the [Agriculture in Brief](#) tables from the BC Ministry of Agriculture.

Sub-region Agriculture Statistics

[Regional Districts of Bulkley-Nechako and Stikine](#)