Increasing Public Trust in Climate-Related Government Communications in BC

Prepared for Honourable Brenda Bailey, Minister of Finance at the Ministry of Finance in British Columbia

Prepared by: Shane Tierney

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Executive Summary

Climate-related disinformation in British Columbia (BC) is undermining public trust in government communications and weakening support for climate action. Social media platforms amplify misleading narratives, while trust in traditional information sources remains low. This memo assesses four policy options: maintaining the status quo, restricting digital advertising from disinformation-linked fossil fuel actors, convening climate assemblies, and investing in trusted climate messengers. Each option is evaluated against economic efficiency, equity, and political feasibility. While climate assemblies offer high legitimacy and advertising restrictions target disinformation at its source, both face higher costs or political resistance. Investing in trusted messengers performs strongly across all goals. It is low-cost, community-driven, and particularly effective at reaching equity-deserving groups through culturally relevant and relationship-based communication. This memo recommends investing in trusted climate messengers as the most viable option to rebuild trust, counter disinformation, and support more inclusive climate engagement in BC.

Policy Problem

The most recent Policy Horizons Canada (2024) report identified the most significant societal disruption facing Canadians as the growing inability to distinguish between what is true and what is not. This challenge is weakening democratic processes, creating confusion around public policy, and making it more difficult for governments to communicate effectively on complex issues like climate change. Climate-related disinformation is increasingly eroding public trust in government communications, particularly through social media platforms where misleading content is amplified and recirculated. Defined as false or misleading information shared with the intent to deceive, disinformation differs from misinformation in its strategic and often coordinated nature (Government of Canada, 2023).

The Climate Obstruction Report (2025) shows that some organizations, while accepting climate change, promote narratives that emphasize the economic costs of climate policy or question its effectiveness, contributing to public uncertainty and reduced support for action (Solomun et al., 2025). In BC, the Corporate Mapping Project (2024) identifies three key “legitimators” that amplify these narratives and undermine provincial climate leadership: the Business Council of British Columbia, Resource Works, and the Fraser Institute. These actors stop short of outright denial but advance “discourses of delay” that shift focus away from mitigation and weaken regulatory momentum (Lloyd and Rhodes, 2025). These narratives are amplified through coordinated digital advertising campaigns, often designed to appear neutral or grassroots in nature, which makes them difficult to detect and counter. For example, a national gas lobby funded a BC-focused campaign that used digital ads to oppose municipal climate initiatives while presenting itself as a local citizens’ movement (Fawcett-Atkinson, 2024). These tactics are further reinforced by social media platforms, where algorithms prioritize emotionally charged or polarizing content, allowing misleading narratives to spread rapidly and widely.

The Edelman Trust Barometer report (2025) finds that 67% of Canadians believe government leaders mislead the public, and only 44% trust the government to do what is right. Trust in media is also low, with just 58% trusting traditional outlets and only 28% trusting social media. Public uncertainty about the credibility of information sources is growing, and disinformation is thriving in this environment. BC has long been viewed as a climate leader, but public concern is declining. In 2007, climate change ranked among the top voter priorities; by 2024, only 4% of British Columbians named it as the most important issue (Bennett, 2024). Climate disinformation is playing a direct role in this shift by spreading narratives that question the cost, effectiveness, and urgency of climate action. As public understanding becomes more fragmented, the province's ability to maintain support for its climate goals is at risk. This raises a central question: *what action, if any, should the Ministry of Finance take to increase public trust in climate-related government communications in the face of widespread disinformation in BC?* The Ministry of Finance is identified as the client for this analysis because Government Communications and Public Engagement (GCPE), the branch responsible for public messaging and communication strategy, is housed within the Ministry's organizational structure (Government of British Columbia, 2024).

Current Policy Approach and Limitations

The Government of British Columbia has invested significantly in public communications related to climate policy through platforms such as CleanBC, open data portals, and public consultation processes. These efforts are built around principles of transparency, engagement, and evidence-based messaging. However, while these systems aim to inform and involve the public, they are not currently designed to monitor, assess, or respond to the coordinated spread of climate disinformation. At the federal level, the Government of Canada has introduced resources like the Countering Disinformation Guidebook for Public Servants (2024) to increase public awareness of disinformation tactics. Although these federal resources offer helpful framing, they are not tailored to the provincial scale or to climate-specific messaging. Nor are they equipped to address the digital media dynamics that have proven most influential in shaping climate perceptions in BC.

A report from the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions (2025) on municipal communications found that the BC government lacks the capacity to track or respond to false climate narratives. These gaps leave communities vulnerable to confusion, disengagement, and polarization, especially during high-attention moments such as in wildfire season or climate policy rollouts. This lack of coordination is compounded by the fact that many narratives originate outside traditional news sources and travel rapidly across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. As the Edelman Trust Barometer report (2025) makes clear, Canadians are increasingly skeptical of both government and media, and trust in digital platforms remains extremely low. In this context, continuing with the status quo risks further erosion of public trust, reduced support for provincial climate goals, and diminished policy effectiveness.

Problem Framing

The persistence of climate disinformation in BC is shaped by deeper structural and systemic causes. First, the economic and political interests behind disinformation campaigns often remain hidden, creating an imbalance of information between those producing content and those consuming it. This information asymmetry market failure allows misleading narratives to circulate without context, undermining the public's ability to assess credibility or intent. The design of digital platforms further exacerbates this challenge. Social media algorithms are built to promote engagement rather than accuracy, which increases the visibility of emotionally charged or misleading content. The rise of generative AI has made it easier and cheaper to produce persuasive falsities at scale. Together, these dynamics create an environment where false claims spread faster than evidence-based information, particularly during high-attention climate moments.

Disinformation also creates broader social costs. When people are misled into opposing climate policies, the resulting inaction delays progress on goals that would otherwise benefit society. This is a form of negative externality, where the social harms of disinformation are not borne by those who produce it. Finally, disinformation compounds existing inequities. In BC, Indigenous communities often experience the most severe climate impacts despite contributing the least to global emissions. They are also more likely to be excluded from dominant communication systems and underrepresented in policy conversations. At a generational level, the costs of delayed action will be borne most heavily by future generations who have no voice in current debates.

Policy Goals

Policy alternatives to improve public trust in climate-related government communications should be assessed against three core goals: economic efficiency, equity, and political feasibility. These goals help evaluate which interventions deliver the greatest public value, reach underserved communities, and can be realistically implemented. Economic efficiency includes both benefits and costs. One impact category considers the extent to which a policy improves public trust and resilience to climate disinformation, based on its reach, relevance, and potential to reduce susceptibility to false narratives. The second captures implementation costs, including staffing, delivery infrastructure, and administrative requirements.

Equity considers whether a policy improves access to credible climate information among communities that are often underserved or disproportionately affected by disinformation, including Indigenous, rural, and racialized groups. It also reflects whether the approach incorporates community perspectives and builds cultural relevance. Political feasibility is assessed through two dimensions: the likelihood of political and stakeholder support, and the complexity of implementation. This includes alignment with ministry mandates, potential resistance from interest groups, and the degree of legal or institutional coordination required. Together, these five impact

categories provide a clear framework for comparing policy options using a qualitative scale of low, medium, or high expected performance.

Policy Alternatives

Option 1: Status quo

The province continues using existing climate communication channels such as CleanBC, open data platforms, and consultation processes. While these efforts promote transparency and public engagement, they are not designed to detect or respond to coordinated disinformation. Messaging remains decentralized and reactive. With no formal strategy to counter false narratives, responsibility is fragmented, and capacity gaps persist. As trust in government and digital platforms declines, continuing without intervention risks further erosion of public confidence and weakened support for BC's climate goals.

Option 2: Restrict digital advertising from disinformation-linked fossil fuel actors

This option proposes that the province restrict paid digital advertising from actors with a documented history of spreading climate disinformation. Rather than regulating content directly, it would focus on defunding disinformation by disrupting ad-based amplification. The province would develop clear criteria for identifying repeat offenders, building on research such as the Corporate Mapping Project (2024), and maintain a public registry of restricted advertisers. Platforms would be expected to block ad purchases from these entities within BC, and compliance would be written into provincial procurement or advertising policy. This approach aims to reduce public exposure to harmful narratives while signalling institutional commitment to credible climate communication. It would be relatively low-cost to implement but would face industry pushback.

Option 3: Convene climate assemblies

Climate assemblies are structured, deliberative forums where randomly selected residents meet to study and make recommendations on climate-related issues. In BC, assemblies could be convened at the provincial or municipal level to advise on climate communication strategies, assess public understanding, or provide feedback on major policy decisions. Participants would reflect demographic and regional diversity and be supported through expert presentations, accessible materials, and professional facilitation. Assemblies have been shown to increase trust in political processes, especially on polarizing issues, by demonstrating fairness and responsiveness. This option requires moderate investment and cross-ministry coordination but offers a clear way to improve legitimacy and public ownership of climate messaging.

Option 4: Invest in trusted climate messengers

This option would establish a provincial program to support trusted community-based climate messengers; such as Indigenous leaders, youth advocates, educators, healthcare workers, and librarians; in delivering accurate, locally relevant climate information. These individuals already play informal roles as connectors within their communities and are well positioned to counter disinformation with credibility. Messaging would be co-developed with communities and supported by the province through grants, training, and adaptable communication materials. The model emphasizes cultural relevance, accessibility, and trust, making it especially effective for reaching audiences that are underserved or skeptical of institutional messages. It is low-cost, scalable, and can be integrated with existing public health, education, and climate engagement initiatives.

Policy Evaluations

This section assesses the policy alternatives in terms of the policy goals; economic efficiency, equity, and political feasibility. Review ‘Appendix A’ (p.13) for the goals/impacts matrix table.

Option 1: Status quo

The status quo is economically efficient in terms of cost, as it requires no additional investment in staffing, infrastructure, or oversight. However, it offers minimal public benefit. Existing communication efforts are not designed to address climate disinformation, and there is no mechanism in place to build trust or reduce misinformation exposure. As a result, this option performs poorly on the benefit side of economic efficiency.

From an equity perspective, the status quo fails to improve access to trusted climate information among underserved communities. It does not address the disproportionate impact of disinformation on Indigenous, rural, or racialized populations, nor does it improve representation or relevance in government communications. In terms of political feasibility, the status quo scores highly. It requires no policy change, avoids controversy, and aligns with current mandates and institutional structures. It also has low implementation complexity, as it involves no new coordination or implementation demands. However, while politically safe, this option carries long-term risks to policy legitimacy and public trust.

Option 2: Restrict digital advertising from disinformation-linked fossil fuel actors

This option offers moderate economic efficiency. While relatively low in administrative cost, it could yield high public benefit by limiting the visibility and reach of paid climate disinformation. By targeting the financial infrastructure that enables amplification, it offers a systemic approach to reducing exposure, though it does not directly engage the public or improve message uptake. In terms of equity, this option performs moderately. While it does not directly target underserved communities, it may reduce the spread of misleading narratives that disproportionately harm

equity-deserving groups. Its success on this front depends on how disinformation sources are identified and whether messaging alternatives are strengthened alongside restrictions.

Political feasibility is mixed. This policy aligns with growing public concern about disinformation and may resonate with climate-conscious communities. However, it is likely to face intense legal and political pushback from fossil fuel industry stakeholders and may raise questions about freedom of expression, even if structured around advertising procurement rather than content control. Implementation complexity is moderate, as implementation would require regulatory design, a public registry of restricted advertisers, and coordination with platforms and media partners.

Option 3: Convene climate assemblies

Climate assemblies rank highly in economic efficiency. While they require upfront investment in facilitation, recruitment, and coordination, they offer strong public benefit by building trust, increasing understanding of climate policy, and depolarizing public climate discourse. Their impact may extend beyond the assemblies themselves, especially if their recommendations inform government messaging or decision-making. On equity, this option performs well. Assemblies are designed to reflect the diversity of the population, including Indigenous, rural, and racialized participants who are often excluded from climate communication processes. Their inclusive design and focus on shared learning help bridge gaps in access to trusted information and increase democratic legitimacy.

While climate assemblies have been widely adopted abroad, Canada has not yet made significant use of them. Canada does have a tradition of citizens' assemblies on other issues, such as electoral reform, but climate-focused assemblies are rare (Busaan and Pek, 2023). This indicates that political feasibility is generally favourable, particularly in jurisdictions where public engagement is seen as a strength. However, they require a visible commitment from the government to act on recommendations, which can introduce political risk if expectations are not managed. Implementation complexity is moderate, involving cross-ministry collaboration, independent facilitation, and clear follow-up mechanisms to ensure credibility.

Option 4: Invest in trusted climate messengers

This option performs strongly on economic efficiency. It would be relatively low-cost to implement, relying on small grants, training programs, and communication toolkits/playbooks rather than large institutional infrastructure. It also offers substantial public benefit by countering disinformation through trusted local voices and enhancing the cultural relevance of climate communication. Equity outcomes are high. This approach directly supports the inclusion of communities that are often underserved by traditional government messaging, including Indigenous, rural, and racialized groups. By working with messengers who already hold trust within these communities, the policy helps close information gaps and promote more inclusive climate engagement.

Political feasibility is also high. The trusted messenger model aligns well with existing provincial priorities around reconciliation, community resilience, and localized engagement. It avoids the political risks associated with platform regulation or major institutional reform. There is minimal complexity associated with implementation due to the flexibility on how the model can be piloted and scaled incrementally using existing networks in health, education, and community services.

Recommendation

This analysis recommends investing in trusted climate messengers as the preferred policy option. It performs strongly across all three goals: economic efficiency, equity, and political feasibility. It offers substantial public benefit, directly supports underserved communities, and is cost-effective and scalable within existing systems. Political feasibility is particularly important in the current context. With public concern about climate change declining and heightened sensitivity to cost following the rollback of the carbon tax, it is essential to prioritize interventions that are both effective and publicly acceptable. Compared to the alternative option of convening climate assemblies, investing in trusted messengers requires fewer resources and is less complex to implement.

Trust in digital platforms and traditional media remains low. Just 58 percent of Canadians trust traditional outlets, and only 28 percent trust social media. At the same time, platforms are retreating from content moderation and fact-checking. These conditions make it increasingly difficult to implement solutions that rely on digital partnerships or institutional channels. In contrast, trusted messengers operate through existing community relationships. They bring credibility and local insight that government actors may not, helping to close the trust gap. Supporting individuals who already serve as credible sources of information allows the province to build climate communication capacity from the ground up. Over time, this may generate broader benefits as others in the community step into similar roles. This makes trusted messengers not only an effective response to disinformation, but also a foundation for long-term public engagement on climate.

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Annexes

Appendix A: Goals/Impact Matrix

Goal	Impact category	Policy 1 (status quo)	Policy 2 (restrict digital advertising)	Policy 3 (climate assemblies)	Policy 4 (trusted messengers)
Economic efficiency	*Maximise public benefit (trust and resilience to climate disinformation)*	Low	High	High	High
	Minimise implementation costs	High	High	Moderate	High
Equity	*Improve access to trusted climate information among underserved affected communities*	Low	Moderate	High	High
Political feasibility	*Likelihood of political and stakeholder support*	High	Low	High	High
	Minimise the complexity of implementation	High	Moderate	Moderate	High