

# **2018 AER Social Research Report**

## **Executive Summary**

**June 2018**

**Alberta Energy Regulator**

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## Background

The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) conducts social research to help measure its progress in increasing awareness and confidence among Albertans, indigenous peoples, stakeholder groups, and Canadians. Annual public opinion research—combined with media analysis and engagement and research data—helps the AER create baseline measures, track progress, identify concerns, solicit feedback, and share information with audiences.

This year, we combined data from our 2018 public opinion research survey with data from the last five years to provide a comprehensive view of respondents' thoughts and perceptions and to identify trends.

## Objectives

The objectives of the project:

- To measure public opinion and perceptions about how the oil and gas industry is regulated in Alberta
- To measure familiarity and perceptions of the AER among Albertans and specific stakeholder groups (e.g., municipalities, landowners, environmental nongovernment organizations (ENGOs), industry), and indigenous peoples
- To measure Albertans' values and beliefs as they relate to the industry and our work
- To refine existing attribute testing and questionnaires to ensure alignment with the AER's 2018–23 strategic plan performance measures
- To identify issues of priority or concern
- To make recommendations to improve AER communications to better serve Albertans

## Methodology

**Stakeholders:** We interviewed 294 stakeholders between January 4 and February 21, 2018. Among these, 215 were interviewed over the phone and 79 interviews were conducted online using contact information provided by the AER and the Aboriginal Consultation Office (indigenous peoples). Of the 294 interviews,<sup>1</sup>

- 20 represent indigenous peoples,
- 100 are rural landowners,
- 11 represent ENGOS,
- 52 represent municipalities, and
- 111 represent industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the variation in sample sizes across stakeholder groups, it is noted that industry and landowners are overrepresented in the group averages, and that ENGOS and indigenous peoples are underrepresented. The AER will be examining new ways of measuring performance and satisfaction among indigenous peoples in 2018–19.

**Albertans:** We conducted an online survey of 1000 Albertans between January 5 and January 19, 2018. In this survey, “Albertans” are permanent residents of Alberta and are 18 years of age or older. This year is the first year the AER survey has been completely online, which resulted in some cost savings.

**Canadians:** We also conducted an online survey, between January 5 and January 19, 2018, of 1501 Canadians aged 18 and older residing outside of Alberta to get a sense of how the AER is viewed in the wider Canadian context.

After piloting online testing last year, we are now fully online with our surveys of Albertans and Canadians (we continue to use the hybrid model for stakeholders, due to limited online access for some). Because the survey was online, a traditional margin of error is not available. It should be noted that online survey platforms are becoming the new standard for market research, and the absence of a traditional margin of error in no way invalidates the data captured. However, as a comparison, had the data for Albertans and Canadians been collected using a probability sample, the margin of error would have been  $\pm 2.0$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

## Cost of Research

Leger Marketing was selected as the vendor after a transparent and competitive procurement process. The total cost of the AER annual survey was \$48 993.

## Overview of Findings

Unaided awareness of the AER increased in 2018 to 14 per cent compared to 10 per cent in 2017, and total awareness climbed to 66 per cent—a record level since 2001. Albertans’ familiarity with the AER improved to 30 per cent from 26 per cent in 2017, and stakeholder familiarity was 77 per cent compared with 69 per cent in 2017.

Confidence in the AER’s ability to deliver on its mandate remained stable in 2018 at 81 per cent for Albertans and 72 per cent among stakeholders.

Overall positive opinions have also trended up through the years, from 53 per cent in 2015 to 81 per cent in 2018. In all other key metrics, such as confidence, performance, media recall, and familiarity, responses have either held steady or trended slightly upwards.

Albertans support oil and gas development, with no significant shifts in attitudes in 2018. In fact, 37 per cent of Albertans reported, in both 2017 and 2018, that there is “not enough oil and gas development.” Thirty-four per cent of Albertans thought there was the “right amount” of energy development, compared with 32 per cent in 2017. Only 13 per cent of Albertans reported feeling that there is “too much” development, compared with 15 per cent in 2017.

Albertans remain concerned about human and animal health (72 per cent compared with 71 per cent in 2017), aging infrastructure (69 per cent compared with 70 per cent 2017), and the protection of water and soil (75 per cent in 2018 and 2017). Concern about the oil and gas industry's use of water was at 66 per cent in 2018, a slight increase over 2017.

Stakeholders have concerns similar to those of Albertans, but they rank them differently, with their top three concerns being aging oil and gas infrastructure (79 per cent compared with 70 per cent in 2017), protection of water and soil (67 per cent compared with 69 per cent in 2017), and the industry's use of water (66 per cent compared with 71 per cent in 2017).

Ensuring public safety continues to be the most important AER function for Albertans at 94 per cent, compared with 93 per cent in 2017, while ensuring an appropriate response when incidents occur (94 per cent in 2018 compared with 93 per cent in 2017) ranked higher than enforcing the rules when companies are not complying (92 per cent in 2018 and 2017).

When asked to choose one "most important" function, however, the ranking order changes slightly, with ensuring public safety at 20 per cent, reducing the costs of regulation (a new question for 2018) at 12 per cent, and protecting the environment at 12 per cent.

Overall perceptions of the AER vary, with 81 per cent of Albertans and 77 per cent of stakeholders holding positive views of the AER. Perception scores dropped among indigenous peoples, however (to 50 per cent from 67 per cent in 2017, although this group was underrepresented in 2018). Environmental nongovernment groups were at 70 per cent, compared with 72 per cent in 2017. Municipalities remained steady at 92 per cent, and industry (84 per cent) and landowners (67 per cent) remained stable.

Albertans and stakeholders continued to rate AER performance favourably in 2018, giving higher scores for effective management of public safety (92 per cent for Albertans; 86 per cent for stakeholders), effective management of pipeline safety (88 per cent for Albertans; 85 per cent for stakeholders), and effective response to oil and gas emergencies / effective management of risks to the environment related to energy development (86 per cent for stakeholders / 84 per cent of Albertans, respectively).

Among stakeholders, industry reported the highest confidence scores (86 per cent), followed by municipalities (84 per cent), although for both groups the numbers declined since 2017 (from 88 per cent and 86 per cent, respectively). Confidence among landowners remained stable at 59 per cent, while indigenous peoples reported 26 per cent, significantly lower than the 70 per cent reported in 2017.

Direct interaction between Albertans and the AER is quite low; however, almost half of stakeholders report having interacted directly with us over the past year. In general, stakeholders are satisfied with their interactions with AER staff, citing professionalism, responsiveness, and transparent communication as some of the key reasons for their satisfaction. Among those who were not satisfied, reasons for this included long response times and a lack of sensitivity towards indigenous concerns. It is also interesting

to note that even though 64 per cent of Albertans surveyed want more information about the AER, only 4 per cent attempted to access information.

Canadians, including Albertans, tend to agree that as Canada transitions towards renewable energy resources, the oil and gas industry should continue to have a place in the energy sector. They also agree that a thriving oil and gas industry is essential for Canada's economic well-being.

## **Use of Findings**

Through regulatory excellence, the AER ensures the safe and sustainable development of Alberta's energy resources. The AER's 2018–2023 strategic plan helps us achieve this mission by setting specific targets for awareness and confidence among Albertans. Regular testing allows the AER to measure its progress, identify key issues and concerns, and respond accordingly.

The AER uses opinion research, and engagement and research data, to better understand the concerns of Albertans, stakeholders, indigenous peoples, and Canadians. This information helps the AER prepare public information and communications materials and supports its engagement efforts.

## **Contact information**

Contact our 24-hour media line at 1-855-474-6356 for more information.