

Workshop on Enhancing Productivity and Prosperity for Rural SMEs and Regions
Held in conjunction with
Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) and North Atlantic Forum (NAF)
Conference, June 16-19, 2026
Corner Brook, NL
Tuesday, June 16, 2026

This workshop will share emerging lessons and explore next steps in how to advance productivity improvements in rural SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and other organizations contributing to rural prosperity and sustainability.

Potential areas of focus include:

- Lean processes
- Automation / digitization
- AI adoption
- Micro credentials and up-skilling
- Communities of practice
- Role of intermediary business and regional development support organizations
- Role of post-secondary institutions
- Importance of evidence-based public policy and programs
- Other approaches to enhance rural SME productivity

It will provide a forum for rural researchers, post-secondary and other R&D organizations, industry participants (SMEs, large firms, social enterprises, labour, industry associations and unions), government representatives, and community leaders and residents, to share information on current activities, programs and policies to enhance productivity and prosperity for rural SMEs and regions, in NL, across Canada, around the North Atlantic Rim, and beyond.

In the afternoon round table working groups will develop an action plan based on session discussion to leverage existing organizational capacities and supports, and prioritize funding, programs and policies to advance rural productivity and prosperity in NL, and beyond.

It will also inform Grenfell Campus industry engagement opportunities and priorities, developed collaboratively with industry, community, Indigenous and education and R&D partners, and inform Memorial University priority-setting more broadly.

AGENDA

9 – 9:15 Welcome, Land Acknowledgement, Dr. Ken Carter, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University

9:15-9:45 David Freshwater, Professor Emeritus, University of Kentucky
“Increasing productivity in rural SMEs”

9:45-10:30 International Panel: discussion / Q&A

David Freshwater

April Conroy, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scotland

Christopher Hebling, Fraunhofer, Germany

Ian Brannigan, Western Development Commission, Ireland (on-line)

10:30-10:45 break

10:45-11:30 Practitioners Panel: discussion / Q&A

David Haire, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters NL

Janelle Skeard, College of the North Atlantic

Fayyaz Ahmed, IBM Academic Initiative, NWT

Sean McCarthy, former VP, D.F. Barnes

Heather Hall, University of Waterloo

11:30-12:30 round table session 1

Round table discussion (mix participants by sector and region / jurisdiction) to brainstorm:

- 1) Priorities to adapt / extend existing capacities and supports; identify top 5
- 2) Priority gaps and requirements to be addressed; identify top 5
- 3) Table report back to plenary (one priority each, in turn; don't repeat what another table said; facilitator(s) captures on flip chart and over lunch group priorities by theme / category / cluster

12:30 – 1:15 lunch**1:15-2:15 round table session 2**

- themes / categories / cluster topics assigned to separate tables for further clarification / action planning
- participants self-select tables they wish to participate in
- facilitator and note taker assigned to each table; table rapporteur selected by each table
 - Possible priorities (strategic goals / objectives, not action plan at this stage) to advance this topic to enhance rural SME productivity, leveraging existing capacities and supports, and addressing gaps and requirements; record them all
 - Establish 5 priorities

2:15-3:15 round table session 3

- For each of 5 priorities, identify lead individuals / organizations to take responsibility to convene willing partners to work on next steps post-workshop
- Identify individuals / organizations present or not who should be invited to participate in next steps
- Identify high level next steps to be achieved 30, 60, 90 days, by who

3:15-4:00 break**4:00-4:30 final report back / Q&A****4:30-5:00 closing panel: key lessons, next steps**

Sarah Breen, Selkirk College

Dante Enewold, Atlantic BioCorp

Sandra Badcock, Marine Institute, Memorial University

Neil Nordeje, Research and Innovation Centre, Corner Brook

David Grant, Office of Research Initiatives and Services, Memorial University

Adjourn