

WHY THE ENERGY GOLD RUSH WON'T PAN OUT

CANADIANS NEED A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FUTURE

By Andrea Harden-Donahue

You can't read a newspaper or watch the six o'clock news without hearing about soaring energy costs, the push to tap into more remote oil resources and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. While focus remains on the challenges of finite supplies and climate change, there is also a growing call to secure dependable and accessible energy resources.

The Council of Canadians is working with partners and allies to help shape an energy future that benefits us all by lobbying governments to demand a Canadian Energy Strategy that promotes security of the environment, and of supply and production.

IN PUBLIC HANDS

More public control and influence over how our energy resources are used must be part of Canada's energy future. As energy expert Michael Klare has pointed out, many major energy-producing and consuming nations have come to the conclusion recently that market forces alone cannot satisfy essential national energy requirements. In Canada, however, the federal government's commitment to free trade agreements and free market rules erodes our country's capacity to meet Canadians' basic energy needs and move to a more sustainable energy future.

The Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) builds on the history and policies of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in expanding energy integration with the United States.

Energy integration has led to giving priority to U.S. energy needs over Canadian energy needs. Our country exports 70 per cent of oil produced yearly to the U.S while importing 49 per cent of the oil our country needs. NAFTA prevents Canada from intervening in energy trade issues, even if it's done to meet Canadians' energy needs, or as part of a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This means we are experiencing an energy gold rush – particularly in the Alberta-based tar sands, where the SPP's North American Energy Working Group is calling for a five-fold increase in bitumen production. This energy gold rush has serious environmental and social consequences, but still our government refuses to slow down the pace.

At the same time, diminishing oil and natural gas reserves and the push to further deregulate and privatize electricity sectors are paving the way for higher home heating and electricity costs. Canada's cold climate presents a very serious dilemma. Stories about families struggling to pay rising costs to heat and light their homes are already emerging in the news. Shockingly, Canada does not have multi-year energy reserves or the cross-country pipelines necessary to transport oil and gas in the event of an energy crisis. Instead, we have export commitments and multi-billion-dollar pipeline projects sending energy resources to the U.S. Market-driven energy integration with the U.S. underscores why there must be greater public control and influence in the public interest over energy resources.

CANADA'S FUTURE: RENEWABLE ENERGY

If we were to suggest a different energy future, what would it look like?

Harnessing energy from renewable resources is a must for a sustainable energy future. It is much less carbon-intensive than our current reliance on finite fossil fuel resources such as coal, oil and natural gas, and has a greater capacity to sustain long-term use. Renewable resource technology such as solar panels, wind turbines and geo-thermal heating (generating energy from the heat below the earth's surface) are possibilities for a more sustainable energy future.

The switch to renewable energy will not come overnight, but our government could be taking action now to start this process. For example, current subsidies and low taxation for the oil and gas industry can be redirected into investment in research, development and infrastructure for renewable energy. Measures and policies reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to smaller-scale, publicly controlled renewable energy systems must also be equitable and not disproportionately burden workers or low-income Canadians. We need strong policies that ensure that Canadians' energy needs are met and that we will have stable, secure access to energy resources when we need them.

Individually, more conservation (or less consumption) and energy efficiency are also important to achieving a brighter energy future. Lifestyle changes such as turning off unused lights, unplugging appliances, using clotheslines, eating local foods (the global food industry is a major contributor to climate change), and using mass transit will all make a difference.

We need a Canadian Energy Strategy that provides security of energy supplies, guaranteed access to energy reserves in times of need, and strong policies that protect our environment and focus on finding alternative, less harmful energy solutions. Only then will we achieve a better, more secure and sustainable energy future.

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