



Alberta Federation of Labour

CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY PAPER

“We are the generation fated to live in the most interesting of times, for we are now the weather makers, and the future of biodiversity and civilization hangs on our actions.”

– Tim Flannery, The Weather Makers

The concluding sentence of Tim Flannery’s best-selling book, *The Weather Makers*, brings into concise focus humanity’s fundamental challenge when facing global climate change.

People around the globe must act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Failure to act promptly and effectively will inevitably lead to nearly unimaginable environmental catastrophe within our current century. Our collective decisions over the next two decades will determine the fate of not only our grandchildren, but also every other life form on the planet.

Furthermore, the actions that must be taken will have consequences for our health, our work, our communities – in fact, every facet of our lives.

This is one of those rare issues when one cannot overstate its seriousness.

Labour has a strong track record on environmental issues, but we have been more muted on climate change.. We have made great strides on a number of other environmental issues – taking a leadership role in environmental pollutants and chemical hazards. The decision a couple of years ago by the CLC, the AFL and a number of unions, including CAW and CEP, to openly support ratification of the Kyoto Accord was an important first step to bringing the perspective of Canadian workers into the debate. We need to now take additional steps to strengthen our resolve to tackle the enormous threat posed by climate change.

Unions are not just organizations involved in workplaces; we are involved in communities. Our workers live in the communities affected by pollution or noxious emissions. It is in our members interest to make our communities and the planet as a whole healthy and decent places to live. In the context of climate change, our members have a direct stake in ensuring that our economy becomes more sustainable, and our society becomes less dependent upon fossil fuels.

THE DEBATE IS OVER

The debate over the existence of human-created climate change is over. The scientific evidence is conclusive – human activity over the past 200 years has significantly increased the levels of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere, which has sparked a slow climb in average surface temperatures which in turn is leading to a variety of climatic and ecological consequences.

A recent joint statement made by the National Science Academies of all the G8 nations, plus China, India and Brazil makes clear the scientific consensus around climate change. “The scientific understanding of climate change is now sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action ... the threat of climate change is clear and increasing.”

This is what we know so far:

- In 1750, carbon dioxide levels were at 280 ppm. Today they are at 379 ppm
- Global surface temperature has risen by approximately 0.76 degrees celcius, an increase unseen in the past millennium. “Eleven of the last twelve years rank among the 12 warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperatures (since 1850).”
- The bulk of the temperature increase is due to human activity.¹

The consequences of this early warming are already being felt:

- A 40% reduction in arctic sea-ice in summer months during recent decades²
- The percentage of destructive tropical storms (categories 4 & 5) have doubled during the past 30 years³
- Disruption of global jet streams (El Nino & La Nina), causing fluxing weather patterns in the northern hemisphere.⁴

Even in Alberta we have seen effects already:

- Prairies are drier today than they were in the 1930s.
- Mountain Pine Beetle infestation on the eastern slopes is a direct result of weather patterns disruption.
- Mild winters due to disrupted weather cycles.⁵

ALBERTA: THE WORST OFFENDER

“Canada’s emissions of GHGs are, on a per-capita basis, among the highest in the world, relative to GDP they are 25% higher than for the industrialized world as a whole.”⁶ And within Canada, Alberta is the highest emitter of all provinces. With only 10% of the population, we account for 40% of GHG emissions, according to Environment Canada.

And we are going in the wrong direction. Canada’s emissions continue to climb. They jumped 20% in the 1990s, and have continued to climb in recent years. In Alberta, our

emissions are now 39% above 1990 levels, and are expected to rise by as much as 83% by 2020. (1990 levels are commonly considered the base, as that is the year used in the Kyoto Protocol).

It is industry leading the way in this sorry parade. Emissions from the oil and gas sector have increased 40.3% since 1990, while individual's activities have increased 14.5%.⁷

Alberta's single biggest, and fastest growing, source of GHG emissions? The oilsands activity in the Fort McMurray area. The reality of Alberta's situation is that we cannot effectively tackle GHG emissions in our province without talking about the future of the oilsands. While other industries, most notably power generation and transportation, also contribute, the oil sands are both the biggest and the fastest growing piece.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF WE DON'T DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM NOW?

- CO2 concentrations will increase to between 540 and 970 ppm by 2100, levels that are predicted to cause cataclysmic ecological change.
- The extreme weather patterns of recent years will continue to increase in frequency and severity
- Temperatures could increase as much as 6.4 degrees Celcius by 2100
- Sea levels rising by up to a metre, causing flooding that will affect tens of millions of humans
- 15% to 37% of all species on earth will become extinct.
- Destruction of more than 50% of the world's coral reefs
- Possibly the complete melting of the arctic sea ice by 2100
- Rapid and drastic "climate shifts", where climate zones move before ecosystems can adjust.
- The possibility of more rapid spread of diseases like West Nile will increase
- Conflict over increasingly scarce water and food resources will destabilize world peace⁸

A new report by the Intergovernmental Report on Climate Change (IPCC), released in April 2007, offers a discouraging list of consequences from inaction: hundreds of millions of Africans and Latin Americans will be short of water; 200-600 million people will go hungry due to global warming; rising sea levels could flood about 100 million people a year by 2080; polar bears and other species will become completely extinct.⁹

In short, not a pretty picture.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line on the science of global climate change is that it is occurring, humans are causing it, we are already experiencing negative effects from it, and that if we do not act

quickly we will permanently and negatively impact the Earth's climate within the next 20 to 50 years.

The time to act is now.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Before we can talk about solutions, we need to have a more solid understanding of how we got into this mess in the first place. The easy answer is to blame industrialization, or the greedy nature of citizens in prosperous countries. The problem, however, is more structural and systemic.

Historically, rapid industrialization and urbanization were the sparks that started the process. Burning coal, oil and gas to fuel the industrial revolution and, in this century, the post-war boom had an unintended consequence of creating unsupportable levels of GHG emissions. We truly live in a "carbon world" – every facet of our life is supported or constructed by a carbon-based fuel. We did it because it is cheap, accessible and – at the time of the industrial revolution – technologically possible. Our current climate problem was created by our reliance on fossil fuels.

But that is only the scientific and historical explanation. To understand how we have become so deeply embedded in the problem, we need to look at how we have structured our society. There are three components to our structural dependence on a destructive path:

- 1. Economic Structures:** We have built an economic system that relies on a heavy set of blinkers for its continuation. The main economic power of our economy is the corporation, which – by definition – must adopt a very narrow perspective of profit and productivity. It is structurally unable to consider a wider perspective. The corporate entity is possibly the least useful mechanism for adopting environmental change. Our economic model only continues to function with continuous growth – anything else produces economic crises typified by extreme social suffering, unrest and upheaval. But constant growth requires ever increasing production, consumption and population. All of these have negative environmental consequences.
- 2. Community structures:** We have built our neighbourhoods and communities in a short-sighted and narrow manner. We have separated where people live, where they purchase, where they recreate and where they work, leading to thousands and thousands of kilometres of paved roads, making citizens reliant on cars.
- 3. Environmental structures:** In our political and economic realms, we have put environmental considerations on a fringe. We externalize environmental costs from our economic calculations – the cost of dealing with a product's waste is not included in the price tag. We ghettoize "green" initiatives in a manner that lessens our guilt without making significant impact – the blue box program is a perfect example.

At the root of all three of these structures lies our reliance on a “free market” ideology for building our society. In order to serve the interests of the owners of capital, we have reduced the role for collective decision-making, group responsibility and individual accountability in building our communities. We reduce our decision matrix to the intersection of “self-interest”, “affordability”, and “individual happiness”. By doing so we impoverish the community’s capacity to make decisions in the long-term interest.

The second by-product has been the disempowerment of individual citizens and workers – who, unlike large corporations, can only exert their power collectively.

To put it more bluntly, by accepting a liberal-free market ideology, we have chosen to place our faith in the foresight of corporations, entrepreneurs and speculators to do “what is right” for the planet. How well that has worked is evident by the crisis we are in today.

Governments have generally been part of the problem rather than the solution. The simple reason is that our governments are compromised – incapable of fulfilling their obligation to make changes. Our reliance on corporations and the market to provide our economic structures also leads to the market dominating over the public sphere. The end result is governments that incline toward less involvement in the economy. The public sphere is shrunk. The state is reduced to the role of cheerleader for private initiative, and as a result governments do not take advantage of the tools at their disposal to create change.

Environmentally, this plays out in very real ways. We build cities around private, rather than public transport, because profits are higher for cars than for buses and LRTs. We create ideologies that demand “small government” that does not get in the way of entrepreneurialism.

OILSANDS FEVER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

the Alberta government’s relationship to oilsands development is a perfect case study of the compromised state. Oilsands development is “the single largest contributor to GHG emissions growth in Canada” and is expected “to contribute 41-47% of the projected business-as-usual growth in Canada’s total annual emissions between 2003 and 2010.”¹⁰

Yet despite (or maybe because of) this clear and direct link between energy corporations’ actions in northern Alberta and climate change, the Alberta government is the nation’s foot-dragger on the issue. The Suzuki Foundation chided Alberta, saying “the government appears unwilling to do anything about greenhouse gas emissions”¹¹.

The reason is that the Conservative government sees its role as a passive cheerleader for oilsands development. Government leaders, most recently new Premier Ed Stelmach, have repeatedly stated that they will not interfere with the pace of oilsands development.

The choice Stelmach sets up is a fallacy. We do not have to give up on development to achieve lower emissions. We need to clean up oil sands production to make sure it operates in a more sustainable fashion.

The Alberta government has abandoned its responsibilities over the environment for the short-term gain of royalties and boom jobs. To shift Alberta's approach to climate change will require a political solution, which will be discussed more below.

THE ROLE OF KYOTO

The Kyoto Protocol was an important watershed in the international acknowledgement of climate change. It was the first comprehensive initiative from nations around the world to prevent global devastation. It is also now a legally binding treaty that Canada and dozens of other nations need to take steps to honour.

Kyoto has had a positive impact in two respects. First, it has unalterably changed the nature of the debate – firmly setting global sights on emission targets. Second, it gives us a tangible target at which to aim.

However, in many respects Kyoto is in danger of becoming a paper tiger – in large part due to the intransigence of the U.S., who have pulled out of the treaty. Here in Canada a succession of Liberal and Conservative governments have done nothing to reach our reduction targets. Meanwhile, the European Union and other nations are working very hard to meet their commitments. This creates a problem both for North America and the Treaty itself.

One key shortcoming of Kyoto is the reality that an international commitment cannot overcome the vagaries of national-level politics. Apparently international trade agreements like NAFTA and the WTO agreements that protect the interests of big business can overrule local and national governments, but governments can ignore legally binding agreements that limit the right of capital.

We cannot turn our back on Kyoto, for it is an essential step toward sustainability. But we also cannot rely on it to solve our problems. Change also needs to be created regionally. We need to create local solutions that will help contribute to a global outcome.

LABOUR'S VOICE ON CLIMATE CHANGE

It is time for the labour movement to take a leadership role in the climate change debate. Until now, we have been a relatively quiet participant. Encouragingly, there are signs that this is changing.

The Canadian Labour Congress has vocally supported Kyoto and is developing a more comprehensive climate change policy. CAW has a fact sheet that outlines actions the need to be taken on climate change, including calling that we “lobby for replacements for

fossil fuel.” NUPGE has a new, detailed Climate Change Primer. CEP offers a detailed policy on “just transition” for workers displaced by environmental change. And now the AFL is adding to our support of Kyoto with this policy paper.

We know it is our members who will be directly affected by a failure to act. We know we have a direct interest in ensuring both lower emissions and access to decent jobs for average Canadian families.

The labour movement is taking important steps to increase our role in tackling climate change. These are positive steps, and we need to continue accelerating our initiatives in this area.

IS A SOLUTION POSSIBLE?

Experts are clear that there is neither a simple solution, nor one that can completely reverse human effects on the atmosphere. At this point, the goal is to “stabilize” GHG concentrations so we can minimize the damage done by human-created global warming. It is no longer about prevention, but about harm reduction.

Most scientists determine that to prevent GHG concentrations from rising above 400 ppm – a level that will still have serious climatic impact – globally we need to reduce global concentrations to between 30-50% below 1990 levels by 2050¹². Some (for example George Monbiot) argue we need to move much faster than that, achieving such levels by 2030.

Those global numbers may not make much sense to the average person. More directly, Canada needs to reduce our emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2020, and by 80% below by 2050. These are the figures advocated by such groups as the Pembina Institute, the Suzuki Foundation and many others.

By contrast, the Alberta government’s current plan proposes an intensity target that will allow emissions to grow by more than 33% over 1990 levels, and we are out-stripping even that target¹³.

Contrast Alberta’s approach to California. California is establishing a firm emissions cap for 2020, with specific hard targets for each industry. It is implementing a network of regulations regarding transportation, energy use, promotion of alternative energy sources and penalties for missed targets. California shows that political will can cause positive action on climate change.

THE ECONOMICS OF SOLVING CLIMATE CHANGE

Many argue taking climate change seriously will wreck our economy and we simply cannot afford the changes required. There will be costs associated with implementing solutions – nothing comes for free – and some industries and jurisdictions will be affected

more than others. However the cost is not as large as some want you to believe. A recent study conducted by the British government found that if we implemented necessary changes, economic growth over the next 50 years would be “0.5-2.0% lower than business as usual, representing, at worst, a delay in economic growth of about one year”¹⁴. The reason is that while there are real costs related to shifting our economy away from GHG emitting activities, there are real benefits as well.

An Alberta economist recently calculated the economic cost to Alberta for meeting a 80% reduction in GHG emissions by 2050. Their analysis concluded it would cost \$3.1 billion a year – about 4 1/2 days worth of Alberta’s GDP.¹⁵ The economic cost of doing nothing, is estimated to be much, much higher.

On the plus side, action on climate change will create good jobs: in construction due to retrofitting and upgrading infrastructure, in the public sector in transit, public works, etc. and in new industries created in alternative energy and other sectors responding to climate change.

In many respects, addressing climate change creates opportunities for labour. It creates high quality employment and more sustainable jobs. The key is carefully managing the transition, through planning, proper funding and just transition programs. Economics is a reason to act now, not to stand still.

THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS

While it is clear the structure of our economy and the interests of oil companies and multi-national corporations play a large role in creating the mess we find ourselves in, we cannot ignore the role each of us plays.

We are deeply immersed in a culture of consuming and convenience. Canadians happily sit in the middle of an economy that relies on growth, over-consumption and blindness to waste and consequences. Our individual choices help feed the system that heats the world.

So it is not enough to blame governments and industry. We must all take a piece of the responsibility. For Albertans, that means changing our attitudes toward consumption – choosing to buy less and to buy more consciously. We need to reduce our personal reliance on cars and on wasteful devices and toys. We need to look at our own energy consumption and look at ways we can reduce our personal impact.

Individual action in isolation will not solve the problem. But unless citizens start demanding better options from our corporations and governments, nothing will spark these institutions to change either. The work must occur at all levels.

SOLUTIONS PART ONE: DOING THINGS BETTER

There are two pieces to finding a way to stabilize and then reduce GHG concentrations. The first step is to do a better job at energy efficiency, carbon sequestration and reducing waste. “The world today has a terribly inefficient energy system”¹⁶, which means there is lots of room for improvement. Priority areas include:

- Comprehensive programs to retrofit residential buildings, policies to require industry to upgrade infrastructure.
- Government should take a leadership role with its own infrastructure, making it carbon neutral.
- Increase development and use of alternative energy sources (wind, solar, geothermal, etc.) to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.
- Require better use of existing technology and patents currently available to reduce emissions.
- End subsidies to fossil fuel industries.
- Revise emission trading programs as they have not demonstrated any success in lowering emissions globally in their current structure.
- Serious commitment to improving public transit, including substantial investment in infrastructure.
- Tougher energy efficiency standards and improved building codes, requiring carbon-efficient construction.

Individuals have a role as well. Some of the things we can do include:

- Reduce our use of energy. Replace inefficient appliances, and upgrade lighting fixtures, insulation and other home energy wasters
- Reduce the use of our vehicles, and encourage use of public transit
- Take the David Suzuki Nature Challenge (www.davidsuzuki.org/NatureChallenge), which offers 10 ways we can contribute to reducing energy use.
- Consider our consumer habits – buy local products and services, reward companies that reduce packaging and minimize the impact of their product

SOLUTIONS PART TWO: DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Taking advantage of existing technology and moving to renewable energy sources is an important first step, but alone will not be enough to achieve the reductions needed to stabilize carbon dioxide concentrations. We need to do things radically differently in the coming years. We need to:

- Design our cities differently – increase density, build multi-use communities that are bike and pedestrian friendly, reduce reliance on private vehicles
- Move to more ambitious energy sources: geothermal, ground-sourced heat pumps, etc.

- Implement “domestic combined heat and power”, district heating systems – where neighbourhoods are powered by small scale power plants, and the heat waste from those plants are captured and used to heat the homes.
- Rebuild transportation infrastructure – more support for commuter trains, buses and bicycles. Less support for cars
- Change tax system to recognize carbon emissions and pollution: the economic costs of emitting GHG must be internalized, so that products that are GHG intensive cost more.
- Extend the principle of polluter pay to GHG emissions – industries that emit should pay the costs of reducing emissions.
- Adopt a new look at economic growth: we need to slow our pace of activity and become less reliant on constant growth.

These solutions require political will – and politicians usually only find that kind of will when citizens demand it. Change of this magnitude will require all of us to be vocal in our demand that we find real solutions to climate change, and demand that our governments and corporations take action.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE OILSANDS

In Alberta, we have a particular problem. The largest portion of our increase in GHG emissions is due to the frenetic activity in the oilsands. And it will get worse over the next couple decades, as oilsands production is expected to at least triple (to 3 million barrels a day), and almost all of that production will be exported to the United States.¹⁷ If Alberta is to do our part to address climate change, we need to design specific policies for the oilsands, and some of those policies will affect our exports to the U.S.

Worse yet, because we are shipping the refining jobs out of province, we are creating the situation where we produce the GHG emissions, and don’t even benefit from the jobs it could create. A lose-lose for Alberta workers.

A solid starting place is to require oilsands producers and developers to better use existing technology to reduce emissions. “One study of Alberta’s oil and gas sector concluded the province could reduce its annual emissions by 26 million tones, or 10% of Canada’s Kyoto target – without costing the industry a cent”¹⁸. All these gains would be through energy efficiency, emissions capturing and switching to less harmful energy sources.

But that is not enough. We need to face the oilsands dilemma head-on, which will mean consciously deciding to slow its development. We need to:

- Legally mandate the use of energy-efficiency technology and fuel switching in oilsands
- Slow down pace of oilsands development, including a temporary moratorium to allow for a comprehensive policy.

- Reduce exports to U.S. to slow demand for oilsands. This will require eliminating or amending the “proportionality clause” in NAFTA.
- Set firm emission targets for individual oilsands operations, and an overall target for the sector, with significant penalties for failure to meet targets.

In the near future, Alberta will continue to rely on oilsands development. This is not about stopping development, but both managing the pace of the development and making the development carbon neutral. Both are possible without negative impact on the economy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFL ACTIONS

There is no doubt that our climate is changing, that we are causing that change, and that unless we do something now, the entire world is facing catastrophic consequences within our lifetimes. Labour can and must be a part of finding solutions and demanding that action be taken. Doing so is both good for the planet and good for the future of our jobs.

Recommendation #1:

The Alberta Federation of Labour will demand provincial and federal governments:

- Maintain a firm commitment to Kyoto and build an action plan to meet its targets
- Set GHG emission reduction targets appropriate to stabilize GHG concentrations at 450 ppm. This requires the following targets: 25% below 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% below 1990 levels by 2050.¹⁹
- Revamp the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board’s mandate to include environmental impacts.
- Place a moratorium on new coal-fired power generation plants.
- Repeal the 900 megawatt cap on windpower generation in Alberta.
- Implement a comprehensive strategy that includes:
 - firm emission targets for all industries with real penalties for failure to reach targets
 - significant funding for public transit, retrofitting and other infrastructure improvement
 - revamping tax structures to end subsidies to fossil fuels and implements a polluter pay principle
 - incentives for renewable energy sources
 - Just Transition programs for workers displaced by environmental change

Recommendation #2:

In addition, the AFL needs to do more to raise awareness among our members about the risk of climate change, and to engage more actively in the struggle for solutions.

- The AFL will take a leadership role in educating union members about the seriousness of climate change and the need for change at a political and economic level, and in our individual lives
- The AFL will prepare Alberta-specific educational material about climate change for distribution to our membership. The material should include tips and strategies for how individuals can reduce their energy use, and suggestions for how to put pressure on government and industry to take action
- The AFL will create a public education campaign to put labour's position on climate change before the public.
- AFL-sponsored events will attempt to incorporate an environmental education component.

Recommendation #3

We cannot demand action in others if we are unwilling to change our own behaviour within the labour movement. Unions need to examine our own practices and policies for how they contribute to climate change.

- The AFL will commit to a “full-cost” accounting of its practices, which includes environmental costs, and will encourage affiliates to do the same.
- The AFL will conduct a “climate change” examination, including an energy audit, of its practices and policies to assess their impact. The AFL will encourage affiliated unions to conduct similar audits on their own practices.
- The AFL will review and amend its travel, auto and vehicle policies to reduce the environmental footprint of AFL activities, and will encourage affiliates to do the same.
- The AFL will investigate locating its office in a central location, to reduce the degree of vehicle commuting required for AFL business.
- The AFL Environment Committee will be a key partner in the development of material and research around climate change.

As a last note, we must remain aware that the actions listed above are merely the beginning of the solution. We must continue to learn and expand our understanding of climate change and how we must act to mitigate its negative impacts.

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- ¹⁵ Edmonton Journal, "Cutting Emissions Won't Bankrupt Us", p. A19, February 21, 2007.
- ¹⁶ Dr. R. Socolow, Princeton University, Presentation at "Policies to Shape an Alternative Energy Future", May 25, 2005.
- ¹⁷ Parkland Institute, "The Gassy Elephant in our Living Room", May 2006
- ¹⁸ David Suzuki Foundation & Pembina Institute, *The Case for Deep Reductions: Canada's Role in Preventing Dangerous Climate Change*, 2005
- ¹⁹ The AFL recognizes reductions at this level will still lead to serious climate impacts. Ideally we will work toward lowering GHG concentrations to a level where no climate change impact occurs. We endorse these reduction levels because they are the levels endorsed by leading scientific and environmental organizations as both achievable and effective. We wish to bring out policy in sync with others working on the issue.