

Alberta green plan defies federal rules

Environmental groups jeer, oilpatch cheers

Jason Fekete

Calgary Herald

Friday, January 25, 2008

The Stelmach government unveiled a new climate change plan Thursday that allows Alberta's greenhouse gas emissions to rise until 2020, and puts the province on a collision course with Ottawa over whose strategy takes precedence.

The Alberta plan -- which falls well short of what's demanded by both the Kyoto Protocol and the federal government -- was welcomed by the oil and gas industry as a good first step. But it was immediately panned by environmental groups and opposition parties.

Alberta's updated policy focuses largely on carbon capture and storage, with long-term goals of stabilizing emissions and beginning reductions by 2020, eventually cutting them 200 megatonnes by 2050 -- equal to a 14 per cent reduction below 2005 levels.

"There's already more than enough hot air surrounding the issue of climate change. I'm not going to add to it with empty political rhetoric and targets I know we can't achieve," Premier Ed Stelmach said at an Edmonton news conference.

"It's a realistic plan that will bring about realistic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions."

Stelmach said his strategy is a responsible approach for the energy-rich province that will allow Alberta to maintain its global competitiveness.

But the new plan was derided by the Alberta-based Pembina Institute, an environmental think-tank, which said the government is delaying much-needed measures to achieve absolute reductions.

"This current plan is, ultimately, shockingly irresponsible," said Dan Woynillowicz, a senior policy analyst with the Pembina Institute. "We need to be taking more action now."



CREDIT: Walter Tychnowicz, Edmonton Journal

Premier Ed Stelmach said Alberta has "a realistic plan that will bring about realistic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions."

The provincial strategy focuses on three key areas: using carbon capture and storage technology to cut industrial emissions, particularly in the oilsands; greening Alberta's energy production by using alternative sources, such as solar and wind power; and promoting energy efficiency and conservation.

About 70 per cent of Alberta's planned reductions by 2050 are expected to be achieved through carbon capture and storage, although government officials said it's unlikely the system would be operational before 2011.

Alberta's greenhouse gas targets lag far behind the federal government's commitment to cut emissions 20 per cent below 2006 levels by 2020, and 60 to 70 per cent by 2050.

Ottawa plans to stop the rise of greenhouse gas emissions within five years, whereas Alberta is looking at 12 years.

Also, Alberta's planned reductions are well below Canada's Kyoto obligations of reducing emissions six per cent below 1990 levels over the next four years.

A federal-provincial showdown now looms over whose plan wins out. Both Stelmach and Prime Minister Stephen Harper have said their plan will trump anything introduced by another level of government.

Federal Environment Minister John Baird wasn't available for comment Thursday. However, a senior department official said they welcome all provincial strategies that result in "real reductions of greenhouse gas emissions," but noted provinces must fall into line with Ottawa's plan.

"We support any actions that complement our mandatory national emission reductions standards," said Garry Keller, director of communications for Baird.

The oil and gas industry, meanwhile, welcomed the Alberta plan as an "important next step," specifically the focus on carbon capture and storage.

"It's giving us more direction on what we need to do to manage our greenhouse gas emissions," said David Pryce, vice-president with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, who noted oil and gas companies are still uncertain about whose rules they should follow.

"There's going to be a challenge there," he said. "The levels of government are going to need to come together with some kind of common approach."

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce also endorsed the plan, arguing it strikes the right balance between maintaining economic growth, investing in technology and reducing greenhouse gas emissions over the long-term.

Opposition parties reacted generally with disgust, although Alberta Green Leader George Read said he's pleased government is progressing on the file -- albeit slowly.

"At least we're moving," Read said, although he's concerned the strategy isn't a larger green plan that addresses water issues.

Liberal environment critic David Swann said he is disappointed with the government's long-term plan for absolute reductions and noted Grit Leader

Kevin Taft would implement hard caps within five years.

"I still see no reason to trust the government will show leadership on this most important issue to Albertans," Swann said.

NDP Leader Brian Mason charged Stelmach is "gambling" potentially billions of public dollars on unproven carbon capture and storage technology, and is worried it will divert money away from renewable energy and efficiency efforts.

jfekete@theherald.canwest.com

Highlights of Tory Green Plan

- Alberta's overall greenhouse gas emissions will rise until around 2020 as the government continues with intensity-based reductions;
- By 2020, stabilize greenhouse gas emissions and begin absolute reductions;
- By 2050, achieve absolute reductions of 14 per cent below 2005 levels;
- Alberta's targets fall well short of what's demanded by the Kyoto Protocol and Ottawa;
- The province will create a council of government and industry officials to craft a made-in-Alberta blueprint for carbon capture and storage, which will account for the majority of the province's long-term reductions.
- Government will introduce in the spring consumer incentives to become more energy efficient;
- Province will increase investment in clean-energy technologies, such as wind and solar power.

© The Calgary Herald 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.