

Opinion: It's time to look at phasing out coal

Climate and health would both benefit

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Premier Alison Redford has expressed frustration with Ottawa's foot-dragging on greenhouse-gas regulation. She has good reason to feel this way because the federal government has shown an appalling lack of political will (to put it mildly) on climate-change abatement.

But now there's a way for the premier to make significant progress on climate protection, improve Albertans' well-being and boost her popularity: phase out the province's coal-fired electricity plants.

Coal is the most carbon-intensive fossil fuel, and the quantity burned in Alberta's six coal plants is enormous. In fact, Alberta burns more coal than all the other provinces put together. In 2011, this combustion resulted in more than 40 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions — roughly equal to all of those emanating from the oilsands.

Why should Albertans care about climate change? The Pembina Institute says it may lead to agricultural losses (because of reduced water supply), damage to the forestry sector (from insect pests) and new diseases (caused, for example, by mosquitoes).

Also, coal mining is extremely dangerous for workers. A recent report in *Scientific American*, *The Human Cost of Energy*, found in OECD nations such as Canada, coal is the “most hazardous” fuel to produce. Its production results in far more accidental deaths than natural gas or oil.

And of course when the coal is burned in energy plants it exacts a terrible toll in death and illness among local citizens who breathe its emissions. These plants give off lead and mercury (brain poisons), arsenic (a carcinogen) and dioxin (an endocrine disrupter), among other toxic materials.

A Costly Diagnosis — a report released in 2013 by Physicians for the Environment, the Lung Association and the Asthma Society of Canada — found Alberta's coal plants contribute to the death of more than 100 Albertans annually. They also cause 700 visits to emergency departments and more than 4,000 asthma attacks in the province each year. If one of those asthma episodes is your child's, it's not a statistic, it's a nightmare. If one of those deaths is your child's, it's an unspeakable tragedy.

But the good news is there are safer, cleaner ways to keep Alberta's lights on. To start, the province could embark on a much more ambitious program of energy conservation — so less power is needed. Much of the supply could come from renewable sources. The Pembina Institute says Alberta has “world-class wind and solar resources,” and the research company Clear Sky Advisors forecasts that, if supportive government policies were instituted, Alberta could become Canada's second-biggest wind power market.

A move away from coal would save money. A Costly Diagnosis estimates economic damages associated with Alberta coal plants — health-care expenses, for example — cost the province about \$300 million a year. Over the next two decades, these costs will total about \$7.5 billion.

A coal phase-out would also be popular with the electorate. Recent polling from Tides Canada found nearly 70 per cent of Alberta residents want the province to either phase out coal and replace it with renewables and natural gas or close the coal facilities altogether. Only 14 per cent want the province to keep burning coal at current levels. A phase-out would prove popular, as well, with doctors and major health organizations.

But is phasing out coal and ramping up renewables practical? Ontario is doing it. At its peak, Ontario's coal fleet was about the same magnitude as Alberta's; by the end of 2014, Ontario will no longer burn coal to make power. Ontario's new long-term energy plan predicts that, by 2025, an extraordinary 46 per cent of the province's electricity capacity will come from renewables. If Ontario can eliminate coal and, in just over a decade, get almost half its power from wind, water, sun and bio-energy, surely Alberta, with a much smaller population, can do likewise. If these great strides can be made in Eastern Canada, why not in the West?

If Redford is frustrated at the pace of progress on the climate file — not to mention the wellness or air pollution files — a coal phase-out could offer the relief she seeks. Such a policy would receive the support not only of respected health groups but also the majority of Albertans.

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