

Albertans favour renewables over coal: Poll

Majority convinced burning coal for electricity hurts their health

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A new poll shows 80 per cent of Albertans surveyed would like renewable energy used to generate electricity instead of coal.

Commissioned by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, the poll also found that two-thirds of Albertans are willing to pay higher prices for electricity generated by wind and solar power, and that a majority are convinced there are negative health effects related to burning coal.

"When we saw the numbers, we were knocked out," Gideon Forman, executive director of the Toronto-based physicians' group, said Wednesday. "We were just struck by how widespread the support was.

"People are in agreement and in very large numbers."

Conducted in February by the market research firm Oraclepoll, the sampling of 750 people revealed 76 per cent of Albertans believe government should encourage businesses to use renewable energy, and 74 per cent believe coal should be phased

out if alternatives exist to meet the province's energy needs.

Seventy-six per cent believe pollution produced by burning coal can harm the health of seniors, and 70 per cent believe those emissions also pose a risk to children.

"Albertans are suddenly becoming more aware of the affects of coal, and if we value their health then we need to start exploring reasonable alternatives," said Dr. Joe Vipond, an association member and emergency room physician in Calgary. "It's not rocket science."

Donna Kennedy-Glans, Alberta's associate minister of electricity and renewable energy, agreed the government needs to reduce its reliance on coal, but said the transformation has to be carried out in a prudent manner. The physicians' association wants coal-generated electricity phased out over 10 years, but the province deems it unrealistic.

"I find the possibility for mixed generation very promising," Kennedy-Glans said. "The question is timing. If we were to just stop, we would be fiscally in a very difficult position."

Early last year, the physicians' group published research that said pollution from the coal-fired plants contributes to more than 100 deaths and \$300 million in medical costs in Alberta each year.

Kennedy-Glans said a collaborative initiative whose members include representatives of industry, government and other interested parties has not established a connection between emissions from coal-fired electricity and such health effects. "I find that part of the (physicians') work very frustrating," she said. "There is an edge of fear to this that I find a little troubling."

The poll, with a margin of error of 3.6 percentage points 19 out of 20 times, found 79 per cent of voters who identified themselves as Progressive Conservatives believe coal harms seniors' health.

"There is scientific agreement that coal makes people sick," Forman said. "What I find interesting about this poll is that people in Alberta agree with the scientific community."