Closing coal plants would save Albertans millions in health costs: U.S. expert

BY SHEILA PRATT, EDMONTON JOURNAL SEPTEMBER 30, 2014

EDMONTON - Alberta would save millions in health-care costs by phasing out coal-buring power plants, says a leading U.S. expert on the health effects of air pollution from coal.

Dr. Alan Lockwood says the U.S. saves $2 trillion in health-care costs each year by reducing pollution from coal plants under the Clean Air Act and closing older plants.

Alberta has plentiful cheap coal just west of Edmonton that fuels several electricity plants, Lockwood said in an interview Monday.

"But it's a false economy — burning what looks like a cheap source of energy," said Lockwood, author of The Silent Epidemic: Coal and the Hidden Threat to Health.

"The health-care costs that you don't pay for on the bill from the power company far outweigh the costs at the electric meter."

Lockwood met with Energy Minister Frank Oberle and opposition parties as part of a campaign by Alberta's Physicians for Social Responsibility to pressure Alberta to phase out coal-fired electricity, which provides about 42 per cent of the province's power, down from 60 per cent a year ago.

The U.S. is now down to 40 per cent, said Lockwood.

Phasing out coal need not be a battle with power companies, said Lockwood.

In Washington state, power companies, under pressure to reduce pollution, worked with employees and local government to come up with a plan to build renewable power, retrain workers to save jobs and improve health, he said.

But tough pollution regulations were a big incentive, as it would have cost millions of dollars to bring the aging coal plants up to standard, he added.

There is a direct connection between clean air and health, including the brain development of children affected by mercury, he added.

"Wherever coal is burned, it exacts a tremendous toll on the health of people who use the power," he said.

Premier Jim Prentice said last week it's an "open question" whether his government will speed up the phase-out of coal plants from a 50-year lifetime — though some are already closing.

Dr. Joe Vipond of Calgary urged the Prentice government to adopt a 10-year phase-out, following an announcement Monday by British Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron for a 10- to 15-year phase-out for coal.

In Alberta, coal pollution is related to 4,800 asthma days (missed work or school because of asthma), 700 hospital visits, 80 hospital admissions and approximately 100 premature deaths, Vipond said. The cost is $300 million annually to the health-care system, he said.

"We do a need a win; we need to be seen on the world stage as doing something to reduce pollution," said Vipond, noting that Ontario closed its last coal-fired plant this year. "If we do this, we show the world we care where we stand on this issue.

"We have better solar and wind resources thank Ontario and we can do more on conservation, and (there are) lots of jobs to be gained."