

ECONEWS

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WHAT'S OUR REAL CARBON FOOTPRINT?

Here in British Columbia we are in the middle of a provincial election where much of the debate has focused on BC's carbon tax, brought in by the Liberals as one way to tackle global climate change.

Along with many economists and climate change experts, I support the carbon tax, and am distressed that the opposition has chosen to play partisan politics with it, calling it a "gas tax", while hiding the fact that it is 100% revenue-neutral.

I also support – with some reservations – the system of 'cap and trade' that the Liberals are planning in partnership with the regional Western Climate Initiative, which would create a declining cap on the production of greenhouse gases by industry.

On paper, BC produces 68 million tonnes (MT) of CO₂e by burning fossil fuels and other means, which we need to reduce to zero as soon as possible because of the urgency of the climate crisis. Make no mistake – we are on the Titanic, heading right for the iceberg.

BC's real carbon footprint is far greater, however – for three reasons.

Firstly, there's all the food and goods we import, and emissions from the trucks and ships that bring them here. A 2007 study from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research found that 23% of China's carbon footprint came from its exports. We must also include the international flights we take, that are not included in BC's figures.

It is hard to put a number on all this, but when the Stockholm Environment Institute studied Britain's true emissions, they found them to be 49% higher than was being reported, adding 5.44 tonnes per person to Britain's carbon footprint. If we apply this ratio to BC's 3.9 million people, we should increase our carbon footprint by 21 MT to 89 MT of CO₂e.

Secondly, we are a big exporter of coal. We've all seen the terminals at Roberts Bank, next to the Tsawwassen

ferry terminal. Every year, we export some 26 million tonnes of coal to 20 countries for use in steel-making, primarily to Japan and South Korea, but also to Germany, Brazil, Great Britain, Holland, Italy, and Turkey.



In 2006, our coal exports were worth \$2.8 billion, and supported 3,200 direct jobs in BC's ten coal-mines, mostly in the East Kootenays and the South Peace. The coal industry is proud of its safety record, and the coal-miners are proud of their work – but when you burn 26 million tonnes of coal it produces 60 million tonnes of CO₂, increasing our carbon footprint to 149 MT. The "clean coal" technology which would capture coal's CO₂ before it is released is years away from becoming a reality

In Britain, there was a climate protest in 2008 at a coal-fired power plant at Kingsnorth, Kent, where six Greenpeace activists climbed a smokestack and painted GORDON on it (for Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown). They were duly arrested, and tried for the £35,000 it cost the company to clean it off. In their defense, they brought in NASA's top climate expert, James Hansen, who gave testimony on the disastrous nature of climate change, and how coal was the fuel most responsible for threatening our future.

When the jury of nine women and three men considered their verdict they found the six not guilty on the grounds that they had "lawful excuse" to damage property to prevent even greater damage by climate change, following the

precedent that that it is legal to break into a house to put out a fire. All around the world, coal industry executives must have felt the ground shake.

What should BC do? Without casting personal moral judgment on the coal workers involved, given what we know about climate change, producing and selling coal in the 21st century is similar to capturing and selling slaves in the 19th century. It is an absolute moral wrong that has to stop. As taxpayers, we should buy out the companies, close them down, and pay their workers to retrain for new lines of work.

BC also exports some 0.35 trillion cubic feet of natural gas to the US each year, adding 18.5 MT of CO₂ emissions when the gas is burnt. When we include the gas industry's methane leakage rate of 1.4%, knowing that methane traps 25 times more heat than CO₂ over 100 years, its footprint increases by 25% to 23 MT. Over 20 years, which is the timescale of the emergency that matters, natural gas has a far greater impact, with a warming footprint twice as great – 46 MT of CO₂e. In total, this brings BC's carbon footprint to 195 MT, almost three times larger than we think it is.

This is a hard discussion for any politician to have, for we benefit mightily from this trade in fossil fuels, just as Britain and the southern US landowners benefited from the slave trade. In 2007, revenues from oil and gas land rights sales contributed \$2.4 billion to our provincial budget.

The discussion must start, however. We could begin by placing a moratorium on coal-bed methane, and on the development of any new coalmines, such as in the beautiful Flathead Valley in south-east BC. We could plan a ten-year phase-out of BC's budget dependency on oil and gas revenues. We could eliminate the industry's tax breaks. Doing nothing is no longer an option.

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