

Turning Environmental Challenges into Economic Opportunities

Scott Vaughan, independent *Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development*, in his 2012 Fall Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, (released Feb 5, 2013), issued this damning condemnation: ***“The gaps identified in this report expose Canadians to potentially significant environmental damages and related costs.”*** He went on to conclude that ***“these gaps are preventing environmental stewardship from keeping pace with natural resource development.”***

The Commissioner is part of the office of the independent Auditor General of Canada. This report reinforces the total disregard, indeed disdain, the Harper government has for the environment and its protection. Among the most worrisome of the Report’s findings are: The lack of preparedness for major oils spills, and the insufficiency of financial guarantees and out of date liability caps for the private sector, in the case of spills or other environmental degradation. It also highlights problems with the fact that the oil and gas sector is exempted from reporting pollutant releases. Given the relatively new and untested nature of hydraulic fracturing wells (with over 200,000 now in Canada, a number which is expected to double over the next 20 years), the Commissioner stated that ***“the government cannot know if Canadians are adequately protected.”***

The Harper government must address all of these issues immediately. It must fulfill the commitments and promises it has made – if not, it will have lied to the Canadian public.

But here is the opportunity:

Canada now suffers the international shame of bad environmental stewardship - and we all suffer from the corresponding marketing and political challenges created by that reputation, in trying to find access to markets. Our prosperity is diminished when we can't sell our energy and other resources to more markets at world prices.

We can turn that around.

No development is without risk, we know that. Leaks and spills do sometimes happen. So rather than waiting for a spill for which we are unprepared and which, managed badly, will be hugely costly -- Canada can and should become the world leader in spill containment and clean-up. Canada can and should become the world leader in spill prevention. Canada can and should become the world leader in pipeline monitoring technology, in remediation, in water recycling?

Here is a huge opportunity for the government and private sectors to work together, to protect our environment; to develop technological capabilities that we can in turn export for gain – enhancing our economic prosperity at the same time; and to (no small feat) – regain the international respect that we have so badly lost.