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Government must heed environment commissioner's warnings

By David Suzuki

When the Deepwater Horizon drilling platform exploded in 2010, killing 11 people and spewing massive amounts of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, it cost more than \$40-billion to mop up the mess. In Canada, an oil company would only be liable for only \$30-million, leaving taxpayers on the hook for the rest.

That's just one of a litany of flaws Canada's environment commissioner identified with the government's approach to environmental protection. According to environment and sustainable development commissioner Scott Vaughan, who released a final series of audits before stepping down, the federal government's failure to protect the environment is putting Canadians' health and economy at risk.

Vaughan says the government has no real plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and is not even on track to meet its own modest targets (already watered down from the widely accepted emission-levels baseline of 1990 to 2005). It is unprepared for tanker accidents and oil spills in coastal waters. It lacks regulations governing toxic chemicals used by the oil industry.

He noted the federal government does not even require the oil and gas industry to disclose chemicals it uses in fracking, which means there is no way to assess the risks.

And despite the fact that Canada has committed to protecting 20 per cent of its oceans by 2020, we have less than one per cent protected now and are not likely to meet our goal within this century.

"We know that there is a boom in natural resources in this country and I think what we need now – given the gaps, given the problems we found – is a boom in environmental protection in this country as well," Mr. Vaughan told the Globe and Mail. He added that not dealing with the risks will cause economic losses as well as damage to human health and the environment because it will cost more to clean up problems than prevent them.

Remember, this is not coming from a tree-hugging environmentalist but from the government's own independent office of the auditor general. It should concern all Canadians. We have a beautiful country, blessed with a spectacular natural environment and a progressive, caring society. But we can't take it for granted. Beijing was probably a nicer city when you could breathe the air without risking your life.

Often, the justification for failing to care for the environment is that it's not economically feasible. It's not a rational argument – after all, we can't survive and be healthy ourselves if we degrade or destroy the air, water, soil and biodiversity that make it possible for us to live well. But Vaughan shows the folly of this way of thinking on a more basic level. Beyond the high costs of cleaning up after environmental contamination or disasters, he notes the government doesn't even have a handle on some of the financial implications of its policies.

"The government does not know the actual cost of its support to the fossil fuel sector," he reports, adding that it has no idea how much its sector-by-sector approach to green-

house gas emissions will cost either, even though that was a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol, which the government bailed on, arguing it was too expensive.

The government has also steadfastly refused to consider putting a price on carbon, through a carbon tax and/or cap-and-trade, even though economists point to the ever-growing mountain of evidence that those are effective ways to reduce carbon emissions.


With an expected doubling of fracking wells, from 200,000 to 400,000, and tripling of tanker traffic off the West Coast, we can't afford such a lax approach. Our prime minister has responded mostly with slogans and platitudes, but others in government say the issues will be addressed. For the sake of our country's future, we must demand that they keep that promise and recognize the crucial role the environment commissioner has in analyzing Canada's environmental practices and recommending improvements for environmental performance.

Given our government's current record of ignoring scientific evidence and gutting environmental laws and programs, it will have to do a lot more to convince Canadians that it doesn't see environmentalists and environmental regulation simply as impediments to fossil fuel development.



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