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## SCIENCE MATTERS

### We can't dig our way out of the fossil fuels pit

I've often thought politicians inhabit a parallel universe. Maybe it's just widespread cognitive dissonance, coupled with a lack of imagination, that compels them to engage in so much contradictory behaviour. Trying to appease so many varying interests isn't easy.

Rather than focusing on short-term economic and corporate priorities, though, politicians should first consider the long-term health and well-being of the people they're elected to represent. When it comes to climate change and fossil fuels, many aren't living up to that.

We celebrate the federal government's decision to implement nation-wide carbon pricing, even though what's proposed won't, without additional measures like regulations, get us to our commitments under the Paris Agreement, which is also inadequate for keeping global warming from catastrophic levels. A government could be forgiven for going slow on a measure opposed by some industrial sectors, provinces and citizens, but it's difficult to take a government seriously when it approves or supports expanding fossil fuel infrastructure and development while the world continues to break warming records, with increasingly dire consequences.

A massive B.C. "carbon bomb" LNG project in the midst of critical salmon-rearing territory, in defiance of many area First Nations' wishes. Likely approval of at least one more bitumen pipeline to support expanded oil sands development. A provincial government that pretty much says, "We'll support federal efforts to fight climate change if you support our efforts to fuel it." None of this makes sense.

As a report from non-profit Oil Change International and 14 other groups concludes, "The potential carbon emissions from the oil, gas, and coal in the world's currently operating fields and mines would take us beyond 2°C of warming," and "The reserves in currently operating oil and gas fields alone, even with no coal, would take the world beyond 1.5°C." That's without any new development!

That leaves us with three choices: managed decline, stranded assets or climate chaos. The first, which the report recommends, means no new fossil fuel infrastructure, existing supplies become depleted and replaced with clean alternatives and employees redeployed to latter. As the report's authors point out, "This does not mean stopping using all fossil fuels overnight. Governments and companies should conduct a managed decline of the fossil fuel industry and ensure a just transition for the workers and communities that depend on it."

Stranded assets means, "Companies continue to develop new fields and mines, governments are eventually successful in restricting emissions, and the resulting reduction in demand causes many extraction assets to become uneconomic and shut down, causing destruction of capital and large job losses."

Under the third scenario, we keep digging, mining, fracking, building, transporting, selling and burning until we're well beyond the 2 C threshold, resulting in "economic and human catastrophe."

Sadly, in Canada and globally, we've chosen the second option, and in some cases, the third. Subsidies to the fossil fuel industry,

the most profitable industry ever, continue despite a 2009 G20 commitment to phase them out. Canada alone promotes the industry to the tune of about \$3.3 billion a year in tax breaks and handouts, not including provincial incentives. Politicians say they care about climate while arguing we need more bitumen, natural gas and coal to fuel growing economies and human populations, and more pipelines to get "product" to tidewater and overseas markets. Saskatchewan has Canada's best wind and solar resources, but the government focuses on expensive and unreliable schemes like carbon capture and storage while arguing against carbon pricing and other tools to cut emissions.

It's all a form of denial. Conserving energy, shifting to cleaner sources, reducing automobile use by improving transit and bike and pedestrian infrastructure, protecting and restoring carbon sinks such as forests and wetlands, and getting a handle on agricultural emissions are all possible, and would create numerous jobs and economic opportunities.

Most national governments have committed to the 2015 Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 2 C above pre-industrial levels, with an aspirational goal of 1.5 C. We're already nearing the latter, with growing consequences, including increasing extreme weather events, water and food shortages, migration crises and extinctions. We must conserve energy, quickly phase out coal power and continue to develop renewable resources.

As Oil Change International says, "If you're in a hole, stop digging."



By: David Suzuki

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