

AWA on the Road to Alberta's Climate Plan



By **Brittany Verbeek**, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

“This is the day we step up, at long last, to one of the world’s biggest problems — the pollution that is causing climate change.” Those were Premier Rachel Notley’s words during her speech announcing Alberta’s Climate Leadership Plan on November 22nd in Edmonton. The announcement came only shortly before many provincial and federal leaders headed off to Paris for the UN’s Climate Change Conference.

AWA participated throughout the consultation process that preceded the release of Alberta’s climate change plan. Our climate change submission recommended some of the policies included in the final report. We recommended accelerating the phase out of coal-fired electricity and introducing a broad based carbon price. Our submission also emphasized that AWA believes protecting Alberta’s wild spaces is an important part of climate action. Intact forests, wetlands, and grasslands act as significant carbon sinks, as well as facilitating water retention, water purification, and curbing extreme flood and drought events. AWA urged that protecting these ecosystems is an essential component of dealing with greenhouse gas emissions. Current activities which actively degrade these important assets, such as large scale clear cut forestry, should be curbed or eliminated. AWA cautioned that although we fully support Alberta’s transition to renewable energies, we believe it can be done without sacrificing prime wilderness areas. The focus should instead be on micro-generation such as residential solar

and opportunities for renewables in both urban and rural human-altered environments.

Prior to the Government of Alberta’s release of their Climate Plan, AWA also participated in two important events. The first was an evening talk with guest speakers Dr. Joe Vipond from the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) and Sierra Club’s Bruce Nilles. Bruce is currently the Deputy Conservation Director and was the former director of Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal Campaign. He spoke of the campaign’s success in stopping 183 coal-fired power plants that were proposed for development in 2000, during the Clinton administration. According to the campaign website, they have now helped retire 206 coal plants across the United States. Coal still provides 39 percent of electricity in the U.S. and was the number one pollutant of freshwater. Bruce told the audience that the Beyond Coal campaign had three phases: 1) Stop the rush to build new coal plants; 2) Create an anti-coal movement; 3) Replace existing plants with clean energy solutions. They successfully completed phase one and now are working on the second and third phases. He said the combination of top down pressure from strong Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rules and bottom up pressure from state based coal fights has been very effective for retiring coal-fired plants. For Sierra Club, its key tools in its coal fights have been: public education, protests, and a lot of litigation. During his talk he also provided an

excellent example of a jurisdiction that, due to the strong leadership of the state government, developed a coal phase-out initiative that met corporate, worker, and environmental interests. This occurred in Washington state where TransAlta owns and operates a coal-fired electricity plant. The company agreed to transition its plant completely off coal by 2025 and invest \$30 million in the community and \$25 million in renewable energy technologies through an energy technology transition fund. The only financial concession TransAlta received was the ability to sell coal in Washington under long-term contracts. Taxpayers didn’t shell out the hundreds of millions or billions of dollars some have suggested will be needed in Alberta to maintain investor confidence.

Dr. Vipond brought the conversation back to Alberta during his talk, summarizing health and environmental impacts in our province due to coal-fired electricity generation. He told us Alberta has five of the largest single source greenhouse gas emitters in Canada and how Edmonton’s air pollution had been exceeding Canadian health standard quality limits. He discussed CAPE’s support for an accelerated coal phase out in Alberta and how it could save the province several million dollars in health care costs, not to mention its help in addressing climate change and other environmental impacts.

The second event AWA participated at was Pembina Institute’s Climate Strategy Summit on September 9th in Edmonton. There was an air of urgency mixed with optimism in the room full of over two

hundred people representing all different stakeholder groups. The day began with an address by Environment and Parks Minister Shannon Philips making a strong statement that “climate goals need to be achieved and not just set.” Chief Allen Adam, representing the *Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation*, also spoke strong words about Treaty 8 being affected by climate change and how he was seeing many changes on the land.

There were excellent panel discussions throughout the day exploring many aspects of Alberta’s sources of greenhouse gas emissions and how to reduce them. We heard from investment groups saying that investors have been feeling the social imperative pressures in the last several years and there continues to be a growing appetite for low carbon investments. A representative of the Insurance Bureau

of Canada spoke about the increasing cost of more frequent catastrophic weather events likely due to climate change. They wanted to see things like updates to building codes and restrictions on building in flood plains. There were also discussions around what we could learn from other jurisdictions, such as British Columbia’s carbon tax – which, as it turns out, looks similar to what Alberta will now implement.

Methane was brought up as a serious and sometimes overlooked contributor to greenhouse gas effects. The US Environmental Protection Agency notes that, over a 100-year period, the impact of each tonne of methane on climate change is 25 times greater than a tonne of carbon dioxide. Addressing methane emission reductions, as well as carbon dioxide reductions, should be part of the

conversation. Many conversations and presentations revolved around how best to transition to renewable energies and what were some of the opportunities and challenges facing the renewables sector in Alberta. Finally the day finished off with discussion around energy efficiency and how the obligation to reduce emissions and climate change footprints should not rely solely on big industry players. Everyone should live their lives and act as consumers in ways that contribute positively to the climate change challenge.

Climate change is a complex global issue and AWA applauds the steps taken by the Alberta Government to make some concrete commitments on climate action. As Premier Notley also said during her Climate Leadership speech: “We need to do better. And we are going to do better.” 🌱



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