Energy Development

Alberta Wilderness Association – Position Statement (November 2024)

# Background

Climate change is primarily driven by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions released by the combustion of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas. The production and combustion of fossil fuels also releases toxic pollutants which have negative impacts on ecosystems and human health. Transitioning away from fossil fuels has multiple benefits for fighting climate change, preserving biodiversity, and protecting human health.

Canada has committed to reducing our national GHG emissions by transitioning away from fossil fuels. Since 2005, we have only reduced our total emissions by 7.1 percent, far less than the 40 to 45 percent reduction by 2030 agreed under the 2015 Paris Agreement. As one of the G7 countries with the highest per-capita emissions, we need to do more if we are going to do our part towards meeting global climate goals and avoid catastrophic warming beyond 1.5 °C.

Alberta is responsible for 38 percent of Canada’s total emissions, and 59 percent of Alberta’s emissions are produced by the oil and gas sector. In addition, more than 50 percent of Alberta’s total energy consumption is spent on mining, refining, and transporting fossil fuels, which suggests energy demand would drop substantially if we weren’t producing fossil fuels. As a major emitter, the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy in Alberta would significantly reduce provincial emissions and help Canada meet our climate commitments.

AWA supports an immediate phase down and timely phase out of fossil fuel production in Alberta in line with international climate commitments. Any future development of fossil fuel reserves needs to be assessed solely on the need for any essential energy or non-energy needs not otherwise satisfied by non-fossil fuel sources.

However, the development of renewable energy needs to happen in a responsible, sustainable, and equitable manner, to prevent further damage to Alberta’s remaining intact native ecosystems and avoid repeating the harms caused by extractive industries to Indigenous and local communities.

## Moving Forward

AWA believes that all future energy development in Alberta should be:

1. **Renewable** – Renewable energy comes from sources that will not be depleted, such as wind, solar, and hydro. Existing fossil fuel capacity is sufficient to meet our energy demands while transitioning to renewables within 1.5 degrees of warming. Renewable energy projects have a smaller environmental footprint, including lower carbon emissions and less air pollution, which can help reduce impacts to both human and environmental health. The switch to renewables is also predicted to reduce average household energy costs for Canadians over time.
2. **Responsibly sited** – Energy projects must not destroy or degrade remaining native ecosystems, including wildlife habitat, and should not further fragment large landscapes. All energy projects should prioritize development on already disturbed or “brownfield” sites to minimize impacts to the environment. Alberta must pursue energy development that reduces the construction of new disturbance to limit further landscape fragmentation, while simultaneously restoring legacy disturbances.
3. **Accountable to the public and Indigenous peoples** – Decision-making processes for energy projects are typically top-down and non-collaborative. Those living closest to energy development are the most at risk for disproportionate environmental, health, and social risks. Energy decisions must be democratic and transparent, with sufficient opportunities for meaningful public consultation, including the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, civil society groups, and environmental organizations. Energy projects must have free, prior, and informed consent from Indigenous peoples as required by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
4. **Fully funded for reclamation** – Energy projects need to uphold the Polluter Pays Principle. The responsible regulator must ensure that sufficient security deposits have been collected by the proponent to fully cover the estimated cost of closure and reclamation before a project begins. This helps to reclaim inactive sites and negative environmental impacts in a timely manner without public spending. Proponents must be responsible for restoring land to an ecologically functional state (i.e., equivalent land capability) based on native species within a specified time frame once a site is inactive.
5. **Subject to stringent regulatory requirements** – Energy development must occur within science-based ecological limits. All energy projects must be subject to robust environmental impact assessments that consider cumulative effects and contribution to climate change. All projects should be subject to regular monitoring and reporting that is timely, transparent, and publicly accessible with clearly established thresholds or triggers to stop if/when environmental impacts reach unacceptable levels.
6. **Government and Regulators need to take an active role** – Government and regulators can no longer rely on industry to self-monitor and affect change and must take an active role to ensure climate change is being effectively addressed.

**NOTE:** AWA emphasizes that the renewable energy transition cannot occur without accompanying societal changes. Alberta will need to implement policies and regulations to help reduce the province’s overall energy consumption while developing renewable energy capacity.

| **Energy Type** | **AWA Position** |
| --- | --- |
| Bioenergy | No |
| Carbon Capture | No |
| Coal | No |
| Energy Storage | Yes |
| Geothermal | Yes |
| Hydroelectric | Case-by-Case |
| Green Hydrogen | Yes |
| Nuclear | No |
| Oil and Gas | No |
| Solar | Yes |
| Wind | Yes |

# Specific Position Statements

## Bioenergy

**No – with exceptions.**

AWA does not support the development of bioenergy. Bioenergy requires massive amounts of land and water to grow the crops needed for fuel, which can result in the loss of wildlife habitat. Less harmful bioenergy could potentially use organic waste as fuel and may be considered in certain circumstances.

## Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS or CCUS)

**No.**

AWA does not support the development of CCUS in Alberta, especially if CCUS is implemented to enable continued or expanded fossil fuel production, or enhanced oil recovery.

## Coal

**No.**

AWA does not support any further coal development in Alberta. Coal is the largest single contributor to global carbon emissions (by fuel type) and a main driver of climate change. AWA supports the phase out of coal from Canada’s national energy supply and Canada’s commitment to end exports of thermal coal.

## Energy Storage

**Yes.**

The renewable transition requires the storage of energy (e.g., batteries) from intermittent sources to reliably meet societal needs. The environmental impact of batteries comes primarily from mining and end-of-life disposal. AWA recognizes that some mining will be required to produce batteries while reductions in energy consumption are needed to minimize the footprint of mining.

## Geothermal

**Yes.**

AWA supports geothermal development, contingent on appropriate siting.

## Hydroelectric

**Project dependent.**

Hydroelectricity is one of the most reliable forms of renewable energy and is widely used across Canada but can cause significant disturbances to aquatic and riparian ecosystems. AWA will consider support for hydroelectric projects on a case-by-case basis, given the current state of Alberta’s watersheds and the cumulative impacts of existing development on aquatic ecosystems.

## Green Hydrogen

**Yes.**

“Green” hydrogen uses renewable energy to produce hydrogen through the electrolysis of water, but it is not ideal where water is limited. AWA does not support other types of hydrogen development in Alberta. While hydrogen burns clean, the production of hydrogen by means other than electrolysis requires methane feedstock, which is typically sourced from fossil fuels.

## Nuclear

**No.**

AWA does not support the development of nuclear energy due to serious environmental, societal, and economic risks. Further development of this industry is not consistent with the long-term sustainability of Alberta’s ecosystems and the health of local communities. This includes the use of small-modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) in the oil and gas industry, which would allow companies to maintain or increase production.

## Oil and Gas

**No (as an energy source).**

AWA supports an immediate phase down and timely phase out of fossil fuel production in Alberta in line with international climate commitments. The future of fossil fuel reserves needs further discussion regarding which sources are needed for non-energy uses, e.g. lubricants, associated helium, etc. During the transition to renewable energy, some oil and gas projects or infrastructure may need to be developed to meet Canada’s energy needs, but this should not be implemented in ways that delay the most expeditious switch to non-fossil fuel sources.

## Solar

**Yes.**

AWA supports solar energy development, contingent on appropriate siting. Alberta enjoys the greatest number of sunny days in Canada, and solar is expected to be a major source of energy on Alberta’s path to net-zero emissions. Solar is not without environmental impacts, but it can work alongside other land uses, on previously disturbed lands, or urban infrastructure.

## Wind

**Yes.**

AWA supports wind energy development, contingent on appropriate siting and the application of science-based mitigation of environmental impacts, such as seasonal curtailment periods to protect migratory species such as birds and bats.