Opinion

Now is the time to transform Canada's approach to climate protection

Daffodils weren't the only things blooming this May long weekend. New commitments to protecting the climate are blossoming all across the country. On May 15, the federal government announced its contribution to the United Nations negotiations on a new global climate treaty, with a national target to cut climate altering pollution 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. On May 14, Ontario announced it would cut its emissions 37 percent below 1990 by 2030; Quebec is expected to announce its 2030 target shortly; BC is updating its climate plan as is New Brunswick. Importantly, there is a new government in Alberta that may take a more rigorous approach to managing the oil sands, Canada's fastest growing source of carbon pollution.

It feels like there is an opportunity that Canada hasn't seen in decades to have a mature conversation about how we want to participate in the global transition toward climate friendly energy systems, production and consumption. This conversation requires honesty as we confront the fact that tackling climate change means a rapid transition away from fossil fuel energy like oil, coal and gas.

To get there, we need the federal government, provinces/territories and municipalities to work together at the same table toward an integrated climate plan that has every jurisdiction doing its part. Canada can and should do more than the national target the federal government announced and we need to use all the tools at our disposal to do it.

The end game for climate protection is a zero carbon emissions economy within 35 years. To succeed we need to use every cost effective tool available to drive the transition toward a clean energy system and sustainable production and consumption. We will need to invest both at home and abroad to get these reductions and we will need to rapidly expand the capacity of forests and soils to absorb carbon from the air. Investments that cut carbon pollution or increase carbon sinks to generate international credits (offsets) have a bad name. Actions that enhance carbon sinks at home also have a bad name, at least among climate activists.

The federal government indicated when it announced its climate protection target that it was open to international investments that create carbon credits and that it would count carbon stored in forests and soils toward its target.

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Carbon credits, when generated from well-designed projects that generate quantified and verified cuts in carbon pollution have an important contribution to make to climate protection. The complaint of climate activists is not that carbon credits are bad *per se*, but that they should not be used to avoid needed reductions at home that, in turn, slow Canada's transition to a clean energy system. Such an approach delays Canada's much needed domestic transition away from fossil fuels, and will hurt Alberta in the long run. We believe that Canada is best served by deeper reductions at home – at least 35% below 2005 by 2025 and strong investments internationally that generate reductions equal to the remainder of Canada's emissions (ramping up to $2 billion in international contributions annually by 2020). So to be clear, carbon credits are a legitimate source of reductions if international rules are followed and if they complement not replace deep reductions at home.

Carbon sinks refer to the carbon that gets stored in plants, trees and soil through photosynthesis. Actions that affect forests through harvesting, conservation or planting, as well as soil through agricultural practices must be reported as part of the country's greenhouse gas inventory. Countries, however, under the UN system can also use carbon sinks, if they have them, to help meet carbon pollution reduction targets.

The carbon stored in trees, plants and soil, however, is temporary. When trees and plants die and decompose the carbon stored while growing is released. A bad forest fire season can turn a massive sink into a massive source of emissions which then must be accounted for as sources against a target. The challenge has been to find legitimate ways to deduct temporary carbon sinks from energy related carbon emissions. The result has been less than credible accounting requiring discounting when it comes to generating carbon credits, and countries using inconsistent reporting approaches to maximize sinks and minimize sources.

A mature approach to climate protection requires that Canada ueses the most rigorous international rules for counting carbon sinks and for generating international carbon credits while staying focused on deep, transformational carbon pollution reductions at home that drive the transition to a clean energy system.

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