

RETHINKING ENERGY &
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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PUBLIC SURVEY FINDINGS
CANADIAN PUBLIC

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Energy Priorities

According to Environment Canada, Canada ranks sixth in the world in terms of its energy consumption, and a recent report published by Natural Resources Canada suggests that Canada's overall energy demands will increase substantially by 2010.¹ Despite our heavy reliance on energy, survey results suggest that Canadians continue to believe that energy efficiency and regulation on energy use should be a significantly higher priority than expanding energy production. Four out of five Canadians (82 per cent – up two points since 2004) believe that becoming more energy efficient and regulating energy use is a greater priority for Canada than expanding energy exploration and the construction of new power plants (15 per cent).

Canadians also express a strong preference for protection of the environment over an uninterrupted supply of energy or low energy prices. When forced to choose among these three issues, about seven in ten (72 per cent – up four points since 2004) believe that protection of the environment and public health should be the top priority for governments in Canada. Fewer than one in five selected uninterrupted supplies of oil, gas, and electricity (15 per cent) or low prices for consumers (11 per cent).

Energy Sources

Canada largely relies on oil, gas, and other fossil fuels to meet its energy needs, however survey results suggest an appetite on the part of Canadians for the development of alternative energy sources. Respondents were asked which of a range of energy sources they felt should be given the highest priority to meet Canada's future energy needs. Results reveal that Canadians are most likely to indicate that wind power should be given highest priority to meet our future energy needs (34 per cent), followed by solar power (20 per cent) and hydroelectric power (19 per cent). Interestingly, nuclear power, natural gas, and oil – currently three of Canada's main sources of energy – rank at or near the bottom of the list of preferred energy sources to meet Canada's future needs.

Respondents were also asked to what extent they thought renewable energy sources (such as wind and solar power) contribute to improved air quality, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and an adequate supply of energy to meet our future energy needs. Given the importance most Canadians place on developing these renewable sources of energy, it is not surprising that majorities also perceive their potential impacts in a positive light. Fully three-quarters of respondents believe renewable energy contributes to improved air quality (76 per cent), and roughly two-thirds believe renewable energy will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and ensure an adequate supply of energy to meet our needs (68 per cent and 65 per cent, respectively).

¹ http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/inter/publications/peo_e.html

Results also reveal that nearly nine in ten Canadians (87 per cent) believe that greater use of renewable energy sources would have a positive impact on the Canadian economy (and 50 per cent think it would be very positive).

Views on the Environment

In the last few decades, highly publicized environmental problems such as acid rain, depletion of the ozone layer and global warming have prompted governments around the world to enact legislation aimed at improving the health of the environment. The Canadian Environmental Protection Act, the Montreal Protocol, and the Clean Air Act are but a few examples of Canada's commitment to protecting the environment. Despite these efforts, however, survey findings suggest that Canadians continue to believe that the quality of the environment is deteriorating.

Canadians were asked whether the environment had improved, worsened, or stayed the same over the past 50 years, 20 years and ten years. Results reveal that Canadians feel that the quality of Canada's environment has deteriorated over all three timeframes tested: seven in ten believe the environment has deteriorated over the last ten and 20 years, and three-quarters believe the quality of Canada's environment has worsened over the last 50 years. Tracking this data reveals that results have remained largely stable since 2004 for the 20- and 50-year timeframe, however, there has been a noticeable increase in the proportion of Canadians who feel the environment has deteriorated in the last ten years (up seven points since 2004).

Canadians were also provided with a list of environmental problems and asked how concerned they were about each of these problems. The findings reveal that Canadians express concern about all the environmental issues tested, however, they are most worried about air pollution and contamination of soil and water by toxic waste. Damage to the ozone layer and climate change are also seen as significant environmental problems. Tracking this data reveals a significant increase in concern on the part of Canadians about climate change since 2004; concern about the other issues tested has remained largely unchanged.

Results also suggest that public approval of Canada's efforts to improve the environment continues to decline. Currently, fewer than one in eight (13 per cent) feel Canadian efforts to improve the quality of the environment have been effective – down ten points since 2004 (and 22 points since 2003). The proportion of Canadians who feel efforts to improve the environment have not been effective has almost doubled over the past three years, and now stands at 45 per cent.

Not surprisingly, given their belief that the quality of the environment has deteriorated and their strong concern about environmental issues, Canadians strongly support action to protect the environment. The vast majority of Canadians (81 per cent) agree there should be stricter laws and regulations to help ensure that Canadians act in an environmentally-friendly manner (and only seven per cent disagree with this idea). Moreover, two-thirds of Canadians feel that governments should take the necessary action to improve the environment, even if such action could result in an increase in energy costs and have a negative impact on some industries.

Primary Responsibility for the Environment

The Government of Canada recently announced its intention to create new consumer programs aimed at encouraging individuals to reduce their impact on the environment. Findings from this edition of Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development suggest that Canadians do indeed see themselves as being responsible for this issue. When asked who they thought was primarily responsible for protecting the environment (individual Canadians, the Government of Canada, businesses, provincial governments, or municipal governments) a plurality of Canadians (41 per cent) selected individual citizens. Slightly fewer (40 per cent) believe the Government of Canada holds primary responsibility for ensuring the health of the environment. Interestingly, few Canadians see any of the other players tested (businesses, provincial and municipal governments) as being primarily responsible for protecting the environment.

Views on Environmental Technologies

Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development also examined Canadian views on environmental research and technologies.

Results reveal that Canadians continue to believe that the development of environmental technologies is strongly linked with economic prosperity. An overwhelming majority of Canadians (90 per cent – up four points from 2004) agree that taking action to improve the environment represents a good opportunity to develop technologies that will help Canada remain strong economically and environmentally (and only three per cent disagree with this idea).

Examining the connection between environmental technologies and a broader range of issues (e.g., improving the environment, job creation, energy security) suggests that, not surprisingly, the benefits of environmental technologies are most strongly associated with environmental sustainability. More than eight in ten Canadians (82 per cent) feel that environmental research and technologies play an important role in improving the quality of the air, soil and water, and 76 per cent feel environmental technologies help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is also a strong perceived connection between environmental technologies and a range of other issues, such as ensuring energy security (70 per cent), and, to a lesser degree, creating employment (57 per cent), and reducing the cost of energy (55 per cent).

Willingness to Conserve

Despite Canadians' self-reported concern about the environment and their belief in the responsibility of individuals to protect the environment, other findings suggest that there are limits to the sacrifices Canadians are willing to make to meaningfully improve the environment.

Canadians were asked how likely they would be to make a range of lifestyle changes to reduce their impact on the environment. Results reveal that the changes most strongly endorsed involve relatively "painless" measures, such as recycling more household waste (cited by 85 per cent of respondents), and using more energy efficient light bulbs in their home (84 per cent).

Results also reveal that while Canadians continue to express a strong top-of-mind willingness to conserve energy, there has been some decline in this willingness since 2004. Three in four Canadians (73 per cent) say they would be willing to pay more for energy produced from sources that cause less damage to the environment, however, the proportion of Canadians willing to pay more for clean energy has decreased four points since 2004.

Findings also suggest that Canadians are fairly price sensitive in their willingness to pay more for energy that causes less damage to the environment. Three-quarters of those willing to pay more for clean energy say they are only willing to pay an additional ten per cent or less for this type of energy, and only five per cent would be willing to pay 25 per cent or more for energy that causes less damage to the environment.

