

RETHINKING ENERGY &
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
2006-2007

PUBLIC SURVEY FINDINGS
DECISION-MAKERS

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 In light of Canada's heavy reliance on energy, Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development asked both decision-makers and the public as a whole a number of questions about their preferred energy priorities.

Findings suggest that both decision-makers and the public clearly believe that energy efficiency and regulation on energy use should be a significantly higher priority than expanding energy production. Eight in ten general public respondents (82 per cent) believe greater efficiency and regulation on energy use should be a higher priority than expanding exploration and constructing new power plants (15 per cent).

Decision-makers express an even greater preference for this idea: fully nine in ten (90 per cent) believe that becoming more energy efficient and regulating energy use should be a greater priority for Canada than expanding energy exploration and the construction of power plants (identified as the main priority by only eight per cent of decision-makers).

Further probing of this issue suggests that both decision-makers and the general public express a strong preference for the protection of the environment and public health over an uninterrupted supply of energy, or low energy prices. When forced to choose amongst these three issues, seven in ten general public respondents (72 per cent) believe protection of the environment and public health should be the top energy 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).

While the majority of decision-makers also consider the protection of the environment and public health to be the top priority for governments in Canada, they are less likely than Canadians in general to feel this way (65 per cent). Decision-makers are more inclined to place a higher priority on ensuring an uninterrupted energy supply (25 per cent).

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

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 both decision-makers and the general public believe that further action must be taken in order to improve the environment.

More than eight in ten general public respondents (85 per cent) and decision-makers (81 per cent) agree that Canada needs to act now on climate change because the risk of waiting is too high. Both groups also feel that governments should take action to improve the environment even if it increases energy costs and hurts some industries, although decision-makers are particularly likely to agree with this idea (77 per cent, versus 66 per cent of the public as a whole).

Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development results also reveal that while 77 per cent of general public respondents agree that Canadian businesses should be willing to pay higher energy prices in order to protect the environment, notably fewer (63 per cent) feel that individual Canadians should pay more to protect the environment.

Decision-makers are somewhat more inclined to feel that businesses and individuals share an equal responsibility in protecting the environment: eight in ten decision-makers (78 per cent) agree that businesses should be willing to pay higher prices to protect the environment, and roughly the same proportion (73 per cent) think individual Canadians should be willing to pay more to help protect the environment.

Environmental Technologies

Looking at public and elite views on environmental technologies suggests that both groups see a strong connection between environmental technologies and a range of other issues (e.g., improving the environment, job creation, energy security).

Fully eight in ten general public respondents (82 per cent) feel that environmental research and technologies play an important role in improving the quality of the air, soil and water, and three in four (76 per cent) feel environmental technologies help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is also a strong perceived connection between environmental technologies and the other issues tested, 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).

Decision-makers are similarly supportive of the benefits of environmental technologies, although they are somewhat more likely than general public respondents to feel that environmental technologies play an important role in improving the quality of air, soil and water (88 per cent) in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (83 per cent), and in reducing the cost of energy (60 per cent). Conversely, decision-makers are somewhat less likely than the public as a whole to think that environmental technologies play a role in energy security (66 per cent) or job creation (51 per cent).

