

RETHINKING ENERGY AND  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
2006-2007

PUBLIC SURVEY FINDINGS  
U.S. PUBLIC

**Executive Summary**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The results of the Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development study suggest that while the Canadian and U.S. public express similar views about many issues related to energy and the environment, some significant differences are exhibited between the two countries. For instance, Canadians are more likely to believe the quality of the environment has deteriorated in recent years, and express a higher level of concern about environmental issues, particularly in the area of climate change. These (and other) results are summarized below and in more detail in later sections of this report.

## **Energy Priorities**

Despite the fact that the U.S. is the world's largest consumer of energy, findings suggest that most Americans continue to believe that energy efficiency and regulation on energy use should be a significantly higher priority than expanding energy production. As was the case in 2004, four out of five Americans (80 per cent – up two points) believe that becoming more energy efficient and regulating energy use is a greater priority for the U.S. than expanding energy exploration and the construction of new power plants (16 per cent – down five points). Canadians express similar views, with 82 per cent of Canadians preferring more energy efficiency and regulation on energy use over expansion and construction of power plants (15 per cent).

Americans also continue to express a strong preference for 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, about six in ten Americans (61 per cent) believe protection of the environment and public health should be the top energy priority for governments in the U.S.; one in four (24 per cent) selected uninterrupted supplies of oil, gas, and electricity; and 12 per cent selected low prices for consumers. Canadians are even more likely than their American counterparts to place priority on protection of the environment, and are less likely to place emphasis on ensuring uninterrupted supplies of energy.

## **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 strict legislation aimed at improving the health of the environment. Despite these efforts, however, findings suggest that North Americans continue to believe that the quality of the environment is deteriorating.

Americans and Canadians were asked whether the environment had improved, worsened, or stayed the same over the past ten, 20 and 50 years. Findings reveal that residents of both countries feel the quality of the environment has deteriorated over all three timeframes tested, although Canadians are particularly likely to feel this way. Sixty-two per cent of Americans believe the environment has deteriorated over the last ten years, 55 per cent feel it has worsened in the last 20 years, and 63 per cent believe the

environment has deteriorated over the past 50 years. Canadians express even more negative views on the quality of the environment, with roughly seven in ten or more feeling that the environment has deteriorated over all three time periods tested.

Americans and Canadians were also provided with a list of environmental problems and asked how concerned they were about each of these problems. Findings reveal that respondents from both countries express concern about all the environmental issues tested, although Canadians are particularly concerned. Americans are most worried about the contamination of soil and water by toxic waste (72 per cent), followed by air pollution (71 per cent) and damage to the ozone layer (65 per cent). Climate change is seen as less of an environmental concern, although a majority of Americans (52 per cent) express concern about this issue. Canadians express higher levels of concern about all the environmental issues tested, particularly climate change (74 per cent, compared to 52 per cent of Americans).

Findings also reveal significant differences between U.S. and Canadian views on the need to address climate change. An overwhelming majority of Canadians (85 per cent) agree that we need to act now on climate change because the risk of waiting is just too high, compared to only about six in 10 Americans (63 per cent) who feel the same way. Americans are also more likely to agree that much of the talk about climate change is exaggerated and that action shouldn't be taken too quickly.

## **Willingness to Pay More for Cleaner Energy**

Survey results reveal that both Americans and Canadians continue to express a strong top-of-mind willingness to pay a premium for cleaner energy. Seven in 10 Americans (70 per cent) and Canadians (73 per cent) say they would be willing to pay more for energy produced from sources that cause less damage to the environment (although the proportion of Americans willing to pay more for clean energy has decreased nine points since 2004).

Findings also suggest that both Americans and Canadians are fairly price sensitive in their willingness to pay more for energy that causes less damage to the environment. Among Americans who say they are willing to pay more for cleaner energy, three in four (75 per cent) would only be willing to pay an additional 10 per cent or less. Only six per cent would be willing to pay 25 per cent or more for cleaner energy sources. Canadian results are largely similar, with only five per cent of Canadians who indicated a willingness to pay more for clean energy saying they would pay 25 per cent or more for this type of energy.

## **Views on Environmental Technologies**

Findings from Rethinking Energy and Sustainable Development suggest that both Americans and Canadians believe the development of environmental technologies is strongly linked with economic prosperity. Eight in ten Americans agree that taking action to improve the environment represents a good opportunity to develop technologies that will help their country remain strong economically and environmentally, and fully nine in ten Canadians feel the same way.

Examining the connection between environmental technologies and quality of life across a broader range of issues (e.g., improving the environment, job creation, energy security) reveals that Americans most strongly associate the benefits of environmental technologies with improving the quality of the air, soil and water (78 per cent). Two-thirds of Americans also believe environmental technologies play an important role in ensuring energy security (67 per cent), reducing the cost of energy (66 per cent), and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (65 per cent). Americans are least likely to associate environmental technologies with job creation (although 57 per cent do see a connection between these two issues).

Canadians are significantly less likely than their American counterparts to feel environmental technologies play a role in reducing the cost of energy, but are much more likely to feel these technologies will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

