

National climate strategy needed, expert says

Betty Ann Adam, 24 April 2015

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The absence of measures to address climate change in this week's federal budget has experts shaking their heads.

"The provinces mostly seem to get it ... the United States gets it, China, the European Union, Great Britain and here's the government of Canada not even mentioning it as a crisis. You wonder what their thinking is for future generations," said John Pomeroy, the Canada Research Chair in Water Resources and Climate Change and director of the Centre for Hydrology at the University of Saskatchewan. "Why aren't we worried about our grandchildren?" Canada has already begun to experience unprecedented weather events that have been linked to climate change, but those will be far worse in 35 years, he said.

Floods on the prairies in 2010 and 2011 had an agricultural cost of \$1.2 billion and a further economic cost of \$4.4 billion; Alberta floods in 2013 cost \$6 billion in damages.

"We can't afford to not do something about this," Pomeroy said.

Climate change was an "obvious gap" in the federal budget, said Anne Coxworth of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society (SES). "Canada needs a national strategy for managing greenhouse gas emissions," but has left the job to the provinces, she said.

"Without that federal role, it's going to be impossible for Canada to achieve its targets for greenhouse gas emissions."

If Canada had adopted practices implemented by some of the provinces, it might have had a chance of meeting its current 2020 target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 17 per cent below 2005 levels, Coxworth said.

Even that target is conservative compared to the 30 per cent below 1990 levels that scientists say would be more likely to have a positive impact.

The federal government has misrepresented Canada's progress, Pomeroy said.

"They claim they've reduced greenhouse gas emissions, but they haven't. That was actually not true," he said.

"There was a reduction, but that was a factor of the recession. That was due to a decline in manufacturing and other economic activities, but overall over the last few years they've gone on (increasing)," he said.

Nor has the government restored funding for atmospheric research that used to fund drought studies or replaced the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration that used to help farmers deal with drought and floods, he noted.

Ontario is phasing out coal burning and introducing a lead-in tariff for renewable electricity projects; British Columbia is imposing a carbon tax, but the climate changes that don't respect provincial boundaries need a Canada-wide effort, Coxworth said.

The government did promise some money for improving urban transit in 2017, but such a measure needs to be just one part of a comprehensive strategy and money needs to be funnelled "urgently" into that kind of program, Coxworth said.

Saskatoon, for example, needs to improve its transit system, but can't afford to do it without help from other levels of government, she said.

Pomeroy also said Canada's image abroad is suffering as it, along with Australia, continues to neglect the problem that has most other large developed nations making big changes.

"We really stand out. It's a terrible thing because it affects our image around the world. We're basically telling island nations in the Pacific we don't care if their countries go under water."

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