

B.C. VIEWS: Clean energy now a safer bet



Premier Gordon Campbell visits an offshore wind project while at Copenhagen, Denmark for last December's climate change conference.

B.C. government photo

[Clean energy focus in B.C. throne speech](#)

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VICTORIA – As the B.C. government was unveiling its new Clean Energy Act last week, a brown stain bloomed in the Gulf of Mexico, visible from outer space.

The disaster on an offshore oil platform is shaping up as the biggest spill in North American history, surpassing the grounding of the supertanker Exxon Valdez in 1989. It will change the politics of energy in the United States and Canada as well.

With the gusher beginning to wash ashore and estimates that it could take three months or more to get it stopped, it will become more difficult to portray Alberta's oil sands development as the continent's biggest environmental threat. The death of 1,000 ducks due to a brief failure of protection measures around a Fort McMurray process pond won't be making too many headlines in the next while.

Electric and natural gas vehicles suddenly don't seem like such fringe ideas any more.

In California, they've been wringing their hands over whether hydro power from B.C.'s larger run-of-river projects is sufficiently tidy to accept into their air conditioners. This is in a country with 650 power plants burning low-grade coal to supply the majority of its domestic electricity needs. This silliness can't last.

Canada has 21 coal-fired plants, and coal is the main power source for Alberta and Saskatchewan. Ontario is working to shut down its four coal burners, while Alberta builds a new one with government funding to develop the financially dubious notion of carbon capture and storage underground.

Here's the gist of B.C.'s new Clean Energy Act. The third dam on the Peace River, if approved, will be the last big dam in the foreseeable future. Its capacity will expand B.C. Hydro's ability to purchase more power from a range of intermittent sources – including wind and biomass – and increase electricity exports, not just to the U.S., but to Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The legislation also directs B.C. Hydro to meet two thirds of new demand in the coming years from conservation, up from the already ambitious goal of 50 per cent. This will be done in part through a \$2-billion project to install "smart meters" in every home, allowing the utility to charge higher rates at peak times and give you a discount for running the clothes dryer late at night.

The government's critics focused on the impact on rates. The Site C dam on the Peace, new power lines to supply the mining and gas industries in B.C.'s remote northwest and northeast, and a series of B.C. Hydro power-purchase contracts with private suppliers will all be excluded from scrutiny by the B.C. Utilities Commission.

NDP energy critic John Horgan says this will mean the government will require B.C. Hydro to pay enough to make massive projects such as the Bute Inlet run-of-river complex and an offshore wind farm off Haida Gwaii viable. Private projects will get a subsidy from regular folks, and Powerex, Hydro's export division, will turn into a sales force for the barons of private power, Horgan predicts.

Energy Minister Blair Leckstrom is emphatic in response. Export contracts will have to be worked out first, and then B.C. Hydro will purchase power only at rates that it can justify through export returns. The B.C. Utilities Commission retains authority over domestic electricity rates, and that will protect B.C. residents from subsidizing exports, Leckstrom says.

That will be easier said than done, and it depends on places like California being prepared to pay handsomely for clean, reliable energy.

One thing is certain. Offshore wind towers will be an easier sell than drill platforms in the years ahead.

Tom Fletcher is legislative reporter and columnist for Black Press and BCLocalnews.com.