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ALBERTA'S GOVERNMENT KICKING OIL INDUSTRY WHILE IT'S DOWN

The new government in Alberta is much less friendly to the fossil fuel industry than the conservatives it recently swept out of office after forty years of rule. And early on, the new NDP government has shrugged off pleas from the oil and gas industry to go easy on it, given the extraordinary collapse in revenues from the fall in oil prices.

The provincial government decided to raise the carbon tax beginning as soon as 2016, jumping from \$15 per tonne to \$20 per tonne. It will then go up to \$30 per tonne in 2017.

That the Canadian province with the most oil production – home to the vast Athabasca oil sands – has a carbon tax to begin with is impressive. But the fact that the province elected a government willing to double the tax is probably hard to understand for Canada's neighbors south of the border. It would be as if Texas passed a carbon tax, then elected a government that was willing to raise the tax. Alberta's government argues that

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the province needs to take stronger measures on carbon emissions in order for Canada's oil to not be derided as too dirty for export. "If Alberta wants better access to world markets (for its oil), then we are going to need to do our part to address one of the world's biggest problems, which is climate change," Alberta's environment minister

Shannon Phillips said. "Nobody knows this better than the people who work in our energy industry." TransCanada used the tax to lobby the U.S. State Department for approval of its Keystone XL pipeline, arguing the tax is further evidence the pipeline wouldn't increase greenhouse gas emissions.

Of course, notwithstanding TransCanada's letter to the State Department, Canada's energy industry has not exactly embraced Alberta's new green approach. They argue the carbon tax is kicking them while they are down. But it should be noted that the tax is hardly crippling. The NDP

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government predicts it will only raise the cost of production by 30 to 45 cents per barrel of oil. With oil prices swinging so wildly, such a cost will probably not have an enormous impact on the industry. It probably won't result in a significant volume of oil sands that suddenly become unviable. In that sense, the province's carbon tax probably isn't a terribly ambitious climate policy.

That has one top official at an oil company apoplectic. "The eco-activists and big labour will do their very best the next four years to squeeze the living hell out of our sector. The socialists have scored the keys to the castle, the biggest per capita economy in Canada, and Alberta will be home for one very grand social experiment. We are going to suffer immensely," the oil executive told the Financial

Post, asking to remain anonymous.

And it is not just oil. Coal companies are worried that the Alberta government could force the closure of coal plants due to province's new focus on climate change. The carbon tax and the potential increases in royalties will likely accelerate the trajectory of fuel switching. Coal could make up just 12 percent of Alberta's electricity portfolio by 2030, down from 40 percent today. But the province could go further by capping the legal lifespan for a coal plant at 40 years, down from the current 50 years. That has raised the alarm for a few companies that would have stranded assets on their hands, as plants may have to shut down earlier than expected, which could amount to 2,600 megawatts of shuttered capacity by 2020.



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Of course, shutting down coal, which accounts for Alberta's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, would be the purpose of climate policy.

GEOTHERMAL PITCHED AS ALBERTA'S NEXT BIG ENERGY SOURCE

Economist suggests the renewable electricity could be a boon for the province

Standard thinking for decades has been that geothermal technology is too expensive and inefficient to be a significant source of energy.

But a growing number of experts say the time may be right for geothermal to assume a higher profile, especially in oil-rich Alberta.

The economics of renewable energy projects are improving as

governments begin to introduce carbon taxes and other fees on large carbon-emitting facilities, such as coal power plants.

Geothermal power plants turn hot water into electricity. Companies drill underground for water or steam similar to the process of drilling for oil. The heat is brought to the surface and used to spin turbines. The water is then returned underground.

"I think Alberta is perfectly situated to make the technology work," said Todd Hirsch, chief economist with ATB Financial. "All the geothermal energy experts say it is all wrong for Alberta. You have to go down so deep to get any heat. Well actually, we have experience drilling through four miles [6.4 km] worth of rock to get at other things that are valuable."

Hirsch describes geothermal

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as "a perfectly green, perfectly renewable source of electricity." He also suggests geothermal could be a boon for the province, where companies have had a knack for developing "marginal resources" such as the oilsands.

"I think geothermal energy might be one that Alberta wants to champion

specifically because it doesn't work here," said Hirsch. "If we can make it work here in Alberta, then it is a cinch to sell the technology to the Chinese and the Germans and everyone elsewhere geothermal doesn't work."

While no geothermal electricity is currently produced in Canada, companies are trying to build

facilities. Some are proposed in B.C. and Saskatchewan.

Calgary-based Borealis GeoPower would like to have a project in its home province, but instead is pursuing opportunities in neighbouring B.C. The main reason is because B.C. has a geothermal program in place for companies to develop

electricity, while Alberta does not.

"That's a massive hurdle," said Craig Dunn, head geologist with Borealis GeoPower. "With a lack of a geothermal policy for development in Alberta, it makes a number of developers, including ourselves, apprehensive about approaching that market."

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A geothermal company wanting to secure the rights to a thermal deposit would have to compete with oil and gas companies for the subsurface permit, since there is no separate program for geothermal, says Dunn.

The Alberta government's Energy Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Borealis GeoPower has geothermal projects under development in Terrace and Kinbasket Lake, B.C.

"I joke it's a great way to make your kids rich. You are creating the infrastructure for a resource that has no fuel costs," said Dunn. "I'm developing something that could be around for generations."

Geothermal power plants cost more money than natural gas facilities. For some perspective, consider the Neal

Hot Springs plant in Oregon that was constructed in 2012 for \$139 million for 22 megawatts of production.

The Shepard natural gas power plant in Calgary began operating this year with a total cost of \$1.4 billion for 800 megawatts of electricity. In this comparison, the geothermal facility costs three times as much per megawatt of power.

Enbridge, a part-owner of the Neal Hot Springs plant, has said the plant saves about 159,000 tonnes per year of carbon dioxide emissions compared to a similar-sized natural gas facility, and about more than 340,000 tonnes per year compared to a coal power plant.

Coal facilities supply nearly 40 per cent of electricity in Alberta.

While the NDP government has

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yet to announce a specific policy, the party ran on a campaign platform in the recent election pledging to phase out coal.

Premier Rachel Notley has announced an increase to the province's carbon pricing rules and is expected to announce significant climate change policies this year. Such changes improve the economics of renewable energy projects, such as geothermal.

"It requires a long-term vision to develop," said Dunn. "How much do we want to invest in the future?"

HOW CANADA'S EMISSIONS CUTS COULD SPUR KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE APPROVAL

Canada hopes new emissions rules will get the long-delayed Keystone XL pipeline one step closer to US State Department approval. The pipeline would carry 830,000 barrels of Canadian oil sands to US Gulf Coast refineries daily.

TransCanada Corp. has written to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry arguing that new Canadian rules on emissions should persuade him

to approve the construction of the much-delayed Keystone XL pipeline.

The proposed US \$6.4 billion project would carry an estimated 830,000 barrels of Canadian crude oil per day from Hardisty, Alberta, to Steele City, Nebraska, then link up with Keystone's existing line, which would take the oil on the final leg to the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Keystone XL is strongly opposed by environmentalists both in the United States and Canada, and President Obama says he won't approve the project until he's convinced it won't seriously contribute to climate change.

But in a letter to Kerry and other State Department officials, Kristin Delkus, TransCanada's general counsel, pointed to new policies on carbon emissions in Canada, specifically a federal rule issued in May to cut emissions down to 70 percent of their 2005 levels within 15 years.

Further, Delkus wrote, Canada's federal government also has joined other members of the Group of Seven industrial nations to reduce reliance on fossil fuels by between 40 percent and 70 percent by 2050.

Delkus, who also serves as TransCanada's executive vice president, also cited a new rule imposed by Alberta's provincial government run by the reformist New Democratic Party that will double the penalties for exceeding carbon emissions allotments to US\$24 per metric ton by 2017.

"Any decision on the pending Presidential Permit application

should take all of these factors and developments into account," Delkus wrote.

The letter also argues that the chiefs of some of the biggest companies involved in Alberta's oil sands industry have publicly come out in favor of such stricter carbon pricing. Delkus said they include Suncor Energy and Cenovus Energy, both Canadian concerns, as well as European giants with operations in Canada, including Total of France and the Anglo-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell.

OIL RIGS BACK IN SERVICE IN U.S., CANADA AS PRICES STABILIZE

WTI crude contract falls, Canadian dollar at 79 cents

The number of North American oil rigs in use is up for the first time since December, as oil's sustained period in the \$58 to \$60 range encouraged drillers to turn on the taps.

The number of U.S. oil rigs rose by 12 to 640, after dropping for six months, according to drilling services company Baker Hughes. In Canada, there were four rigs back in service for a total of 139, but still 170 rigs fewer than there were one year ago.

West Texas Intermediate crude, which had bounced upward after taking a four per cent drop yesterday, reversed course. At the close, it was down 43 cents to \$56.53 US a barrel.

Brent crude, the most common international contract, was at \$61.85, down 16 cents. Canadian

contract Western Canada Select was trading at \$45.53 US a barrel, a gain of 57 cents.

The Canadian dollar is now at 79.67 US cents, slipping below 80 cents for the first time since early June, in response to the strong greenback. Investors are flocking to the U.S. dollar as a safe haven amid the uncertainty over the Greek economy.

The loonie was responding to news released Tuesday that the economy contracted in April, while the Bank of America issued a prediction that Canada would be in recession this quarter.

At the close, the S&P/TSX composite index was ahead 96 points at 14,649 as trading resumed after a one-day break for Canada Day. Stock markets were upbeat on improved oil prices.

On Wednesday, oil took a hit after the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported that oil stockpiles were growing.

Inventories rose by 2.4 million barrels

last week, the first weekly climb since April, but gasoline inventories fell as U.S. drivers took to the roads for the summer driving season.

The \$60 range for WTI is considered critical, because that price allows U.S. shale producers to break even.

Analysts have been predicting a return to drilling as oil spent most of last month in the \$58 range.

"We believe about 100 rigs could be added to the U.S. rig count between now and year-end," analysts at Evercore ISI, a banking advisory firm, said in a report this week, noting "The bottom is passing and the upturn is arriving."

There is a global glut of oil and OPEC has refused to trim its production. That brought prices down from \$107 this time last year.

However, the high U.S. dollar is making oil much less affordable in the rest of the world.



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