Clean Energy and Climate Action in North America: A coordinated approach

IISD/Pembina Official Side Event at COP 15
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Bella Center, Copenhagen

Panel Members:
- Jean Charest, Premier of Quebec
- Gabriel Quadri, Director, EcoSecurities Mexico and Central America
- Greg Selinger, Premier of Manitoba
- Shalini Vajjhala, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of International Affairs, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Chairs:
- Clare Demerse, Associate Director, Climate Change, Pembina Institute
- Dan Gagnier, Chair of Board of Directors, International Institute for Sustainable Development

Panel members discussed how a coordinated, collaborative North American approach to climate change and clean energy can assist Canada, Mexico and the United States in achieving deep emission reductions and meeting the goals of the UNFCCC.

Premier Charest noted that sub-national governments are responsible for implementing action on climate change. Municipalities and provinces are already moving on many of the issues, and if we wait for higher levels of government to act, little will happen. He noted that North American cooperation is important to Quebec, especially given the province’s energy exports to the United States. Quebec has adopted California emission standards for vehicles, and the province welcomes the positive movements at the national level in the United States (there is potential for legislation in near future).

Gabriel Quadri remarked that there are three critical sectors where climate change policy in North America most impacts Mexico. The most important is transportation; by 2020, the transportation sector will make up one third of Mexico’s emissions given the current rate of growth. The second key sector is electricity and energy use. This is not only about developing alternative energies, but using existing systems more efficiently. Deforestation is a third key area for Mexico, but is not as much of an issue in Canada and the United States. Subsidies play a huge role in the Mexican experience, particularly when trying to phase out oil and gas. The sector receives “obscene” subsidies, and this needs to change if Mexico is to get serious about renewables.
Premier Selinger noted that 60 per cent of Manitoba’s hydro electricity is sold to the United States, and the sale of electricity is a major factor in North American energy relationship. The potential recognition by the United States of large-scale hydro as a renewable will be a critical issue for Manitoba. The smart grid discussion is very important in the North American context, particularly related to allowing access for green technologies, including wind and solar. Cap-and-trade will also be a key piece of the puzzle moving forward in North America. There is pressure to start changing things before we pass the “tipping point.” For example, Manitoba is pursuing UNESCO world heritage designation for part of the boreal forest in Manitoba to help conservation efforts.

Shalini Vajjhala described recent decisions and actions related to energy and climate change in the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2009 that carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere constitute public endangerment, and this decision essentially gives EPA the mandate to address climate change in a much broader sense. Legislation at the federal level (Waxman-Markey and Kerry-Boxer bills) will also play a critical role in pushing for climate change action. The EPA is creating a GHG Emissions Registry, and emissions data from different sectors and facilities will be made public. Ms. Vajjhala noted that sub-regional governments can contribute to the climate change negotiations through: 1) specificity—negotiated documents are very broad, thus local and regional experiences can add the specifics; 2) transparency—this is not necessarily required, but is fundamental to allow people to see what is working and where their money is going; and 3) coordination—international agreements rely on existing networks and systems for implementation.

Panel members also participated in a discussion session with the audience. The first discussion topic explored the role of federal and sub-national governments. Premier Charest noted that in the absence of federal legislation, regional initiatives have taken shape, and that is a positive development. However, federal governments are critical for setting broad directions, enacting climate change legislation, using taxation to achieve objectives and providing funding. Ms. Vajjhala stated that there are roles for both federal and sub-national governments that depend on specific projects, scale and so forth. Premier Selinger remarked on the role of the federal government as facilitator, in that it should provide enabling legislation and resources to the provinces and municipalities that are responsible for implementation. There is a need for increased federal government involvement in such areas as east-west energy flows and national grids. At this point in Canada, it is easier to move energy south into the United States than into a neighbouring province.

A second discussion topic was the importance of water as a border issue and the sharing of water resources. Premier Charest noted that water sharing is a long-standing issue between Canada and the United States, and institutions, such as the International Joint Commission, have been established to oversee the relationship. There is a real anxiety in Canada that the United States will “put a pipe in place and take all our water.” Mr. Quadri remarked that
cooperation on water issues is very important, particularly with climate change contributing to resource scarcity issues.