



# Saskatchewan



# Notes

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## How Saskatchewan Can Develop A Sustainable Environment and A Worker-Friendly Economy

— by Jan Norris

A sustainable environment is one that is in balance. Like two children of equal weight playing on a seesaw, a sustainable environment is in a state of dynamic equilibrium: it has its ups and downs but no one gets stuck in the mud or is left flailing in the air.

The earth's miraculously complex environment has remained in balance for thousands of years, allowing human beings to thrive. But as our technologies have become more powerful, people's role in the environment has increased dramatically and dangerously. It is as if a big kid has jumped on the seesaw and sent it madly pitching up and down. Our heads are either buried in the sand or lost in the clouds; or we are moving too fast to see a thing.

If we could get off the seesaw and look objectively at the world we would be horrified. We would see that human activity is so vast in scale it is threatening to knock the planet's environment off balance. It is not an exaggeration to say we are in grave danger of destroying the life support systems upon which we all depend.

### Energy

One of our greatest challenges will be to revolutionize the way we power our economy. Currently we get most of our energy from burning fossil fuels. This, according to most scientists and the evidence of our own senses, is changing the climate. Thus we have the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and worldwide growth – by 20% to 30% every year – in the renewable energy sector. Analysts predict the development of a diversified energy system, including wind and solar power, hydrogen fuel cells, bio-fuels, and the earth's own heat.

Fortunately, Saskatchewan is well equipped to participate in the coming revolution. Our province is blessed with both wind and sun. We have the potential to become environmental leaders by building wind farms and putting a solar panel – or a cluster of them – on every roof.

This is where having our energy sector controlled by crown corporations comes in handy. It gives the government – that is the people – the ability to manage its own resources.<sup>1</sup> Rather than waiting for a private company to figure out how it could make a quick profit retrofitting Saskatchewan's energy system

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(which might never happen given our small widely dispersed population) our crowns can be part of a long-term strategy. In the same way that they have been able to provide electricity and phone/internet service to the entire province when it would be unprofitable for a private company to do so, crown corporations can help transform our energy sector into one which is based on renewable technologies and conservation, without skyrocketing utility costs or job losses.

In fact, there will be more jobs in an economy based on renewables. Employment relative to investment is not particularly plentiful in the fossil fuel sector, being just over seven jobs per million dollars invested. This compares with twelve jobs per million in the solar/wind sector and 36 jobs per million invested in energy efficiency, such as insulating buildings and installing new windows and furnaces.

## Transportation

Another big change will be in transportation, which produces over a quarter of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Saskatchewan used to be a province full of railroads. There were trains to every little town, and twelve per day from Moose Jaw to Regina. Unfortunately we replaced this energy-efficient public transportation system with a heavily-subsidized private one. Road-based transport is an energy glutton both in its construction (building highways, manufacturing cars and trucks) and usage (propelling huge weights at high speeds for long distances, often to move one person). But it's not too late to resurrect our rail system, powering it with solar or wind based electricity, hydrogen fuel cells, or bio-fuel. We could travel more safely, help the environment, and catch up on our reading at the same time. And public transportation hires people: VIA Rail, for example, even with its very limited service, provides 49 full-time jobs in Saskatchewan on an investment of \$3 million, over sixteen jobs per million invested. A return to rail shipping would also be a happy event for our beleaguered farmers, who could return to trucking their crops just to the nearest town.

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## Agriculture and Rural Saskatchewan

Sadly, the state of Saskatchewan farmers is clearly unsustainable. In just one year, from 2000 to 2001, Saskatchewan lost 11,000 farm jobs. Figures for 2002 are not yet available but will likely be equally miserable. Those who speak of a "farm crisis" are not overstating the case. Farm communities are crumbling as families leave and corporations move in.

Probably the single best thing the government could do to promote sustainable farming would be to set up an Organics Transition Fund to help farmers make the switch to certified organic crops and livestock. It makes economic as well as environmental sense, since the market for organic crops is growing steadily, farmers get more for them, and input costs are considerably lower. But there is a three-year transition period when some kind of support is critical for farmers making the change.

A number of studies have demonstrated that rural towns that have many smaller farms surrounding them are healthier, in every measure, than towns surrounded by a few large farms.<sup>2</sup>

An income-support programme for people wanting to get into farming would help repopulate the land and revitalize rural communities. The province could help pay for it by eliminating its investment in and support for intensive livestock operations.

These factory farms have resulted in the loss of thousands of small hog producers in the last decade. Factory farms provide only a handful of jobs, and have a brutal effect on water supplies and rural communities. Especially given our dry climate it is foolhardy to encourage the construction of big barns that require as much as 45 million gallons of water every year. Most of these barns provide only five or six jobs which are low-paid, unpleasant, dangerous, and non-union.

The province would also do well to end its subsidies to the biotechnology industry. No one knows the results of releasing genetically modified organisms into the environment, but problems

predicted years ago are showing up in recent studies. For example, research shows GM crops grown on just 10% of a given region will contaminate the rest by “genetic drift”. This has serious implications for our trade with Europe, where opposition to genetically engineered food is strong and growing stronger. And unstoppable “superweeds”, genetically modified to be resistant to herbicides, are a growing problem. The fact that genetically modified organisms usually contain viruses and antibiotic resistance make their uncontrolled proliferation all the more frightening.

## Forestry

Saskatchewan’s forestry sector also needs reforming, away from massive clearcuts and towards selective logging. Clearcutting provides an example of a lose-lose situation in which machines replace people and destroy an ecosystem. Huge “feller bunchers” have replaced many bunches of fellers, with negative effects on the forest and on the number of logging jobs. A fine goal would be to manage our trees according to the principles of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international body that certifies forests based on ecological criteria. Again this would have economic benefits as FSC certification increases marketability abroad and employment at home.

## “Green” Taxes and Government Expenditures

Finally, however, there is a sure-fire way to put an economy on the road to sustainability and that is through the wise use of taxes. By taxing things that hurt the environment and/or handing out credits for things that help it, governments can turn environmental destruction around. A carbon tax, for example, paid by the producers of coal, oil, and gas and inevitably reflected in the cost of consumer goods, is the quickest way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Already in place in a

number of European countries, just enacted in New Zealand<sup>3</sup>, and being talked about in Australia and Japan, carbon taxes are usually designed to be revenue-neutral, that is they are offset by a reduction in taxes elsewhere. Most often taxes on hiring people are reduced, to encourage job creation. Suddenly labour-intensive carbon-saving operations like insulating buildings, installing solar panels, planting trees, and running transit systems become feasible.

Governments can also make their economies more sustainable by changing the way they do their bookkeeping. Faced with spending a million dollars hiring bus drivers versus a million on concrete or computers, legislators consider them an equal expense in the budget. But this is a fallacy. The bus drivers will pay taxes and buy goods in local stores. Thus a measurable portion of the government’s million dollar expense ends up back in the treasury. Accurately reflecting this reality on the government’s books would make hiring people easier and replacing them with machines more difficult.

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**Employment Transitions**

Unfortunately, even though the new economy is predicted to increase employment, people who lose their jobs in the old one may be in the wrong place or have the wrong skills to take these new jobs. Or the new jobs may not appear just when the old ones evaporate. Estimates are that 12,800 people will lose their jobs in the energy sector over the next ten years due to upcoming changes in energy production and consumption.<sup>4</sup> We must have “just transition” programmes to help these workers. Such programmes would provide income support, training (including university), and moving expenses for displaced workers. Eliminating

annual federal subsidies to the fossil fuel and nuclear industries, which amount to \$250 million each year, would help pay for these programmes.

## Conclusions

If the people of Saskatchewan want to leave a sustainable environment for our descendants, or even a habitable one, there are many things we can do. We can ask our energy utility providers, the crown corporations, to get serious about wind and solar production. We can support small farms and organic growers. We can bring back public transport. We can stop clearcutting our forests. We can call a moratorium on factory farms and genetically modified crops. We can insist on a comprehensive “just transition” programme for displaced workers. In short, we can demand that our legislators put aside short-sighted interests and take the long view.

And each of us can do our best as individuals, educating ourselves on the consequences of our actions, striving to conserve energy and resources, and learning to “live simply so others may simply live”.

Our grandchildren will thank us for it. ❖

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*Jan Norris is an environmentalist who currently sits on the Board of Directors of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society and is a Research Associate for the Saskatchewan Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.*

### Footnotes:

- 1) It is an ability our federal government is on the verge of giving away under the GATS Agreement now being negotiated at the World Trade Organization.
- 2) Most notably the research of Walter Goldschmidt in California in the 1940's. More recent studies at Cornell and elsewhere have reinforced Goldschmidt's conclusions.
- 3) Though not due to come into force there until 2007 and then only if the Kyoto Protocol is in force.
- 4) This compares favourably with the 80,000 jobs lost in the energy sector in the 1990's, mostly due to new technology and the elimination of service stations. Figures are from Making Kyoto Work by Dale Marshall, CCPA, 2002.

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**Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – SK**

**2717 Wentz Ave., Saskatoon, SK S7K 4B6**

**Ph: 306-978-5308 — Fax: 306-922-9162**

**Email: [ccpasask@sasktel.net](mailto:ccpasask@sasktel.net)**