

British Columbians' views on the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy

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At a glance

This backgrounder details the results of a polling analysis of British Columbians' opinions on commitments B.C. has made under the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy (Action Plan).

The poll, commissioned by the Pembina Institute, Clean Energy Canada and the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions (PICS) and conducted by Strategic Communications Inc. on April 1 and 2, 2014, found that British Columbians want their government to follow through on its commitments in the Action Plan, despite the low profile given to the agreement since it was signed in 2013.

British Columbians expect the government to meet its targets for reducing carbon pollution. This presents a challenge to the government given the significant increase in carbon pollution that will accompany liquefied natural gas (LNG) development, if it proceeds at the levels targeted by the government.

None of the remaining Action Plan commitments tested in this survey conflict with other government objectives such as LNG development. The results show that the B.C. government can follow through on those commitments in a way that garners public support and aligns with the province's climate action objectives.

Background

Late last year, the governments of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and California signed the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy. Underpinning the Action Plan is acknowledgment of "the clear and convincing scientific evidence of climate change, ocean acidification and other impacts from increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which threaten our people, our economy and our natural resources."¹

The Action Plan emphasizes the important role that public policy plays in reducing carbon pollution and the significant economic opportunities that are associated with clean energy and energy efficiency. As the 2012 *West Coast Clean Economy* report shows, the right policy

¹ The Governments of California, British Columbia, Oregon and Washington, *Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy* (October 28, 2013), 1.
<http://www.pacificcoastcollaborative.org/Documents/Pacific%20Coast%20Climate%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

framework could create more than one million jobs in the region in the energy efficiency and advanced transportation sectors.²

Methodology

To understand how British Columbians would prioritize the various commitments made by B.C. under the Action Plan, the Pembina Institute, Clean Energy Canada and PICS commissioned an opinion poll asking questions related to the following five commitments:

1. Meet existing targets to reduce carbon pollution.³
2. Ensure that, within two years, 10 per cent of new vehicles purchased by governments and companies are electric vehicles.
3. Enable a transition to homes and buildings that require very little energy to heat and cool.
4. Continue using a carbon tax to reduce the pollution that causes climate change.
5. Maintain an existing requirement for lower-carbon transportation fuels.

These five commitments were selected for this survey because they apply directly to the province and are the most significant and measurable within a B.C. context. The full Action Plan contains 14 commitments.

Strategic Communications Inc. conducted the poll as an online survey on April 1 and 2, 2014, among 802 adult British Columbia residents using an established proprietary research panel. The results have been statistically weighted according to the most current education, age, gender and region census data to ensure a sample representative of the province's adult population. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding.

The questions included the following preamble:

“Along with Washington, Oregon and California, B.C. is a signatory to the Pacific Coast Action Plan on Climate and Energy — an agreement intended to build momentum for broader international efforts to combat climate change. What priority should the B.C. government place on each of the following commitments made in that agreement?”

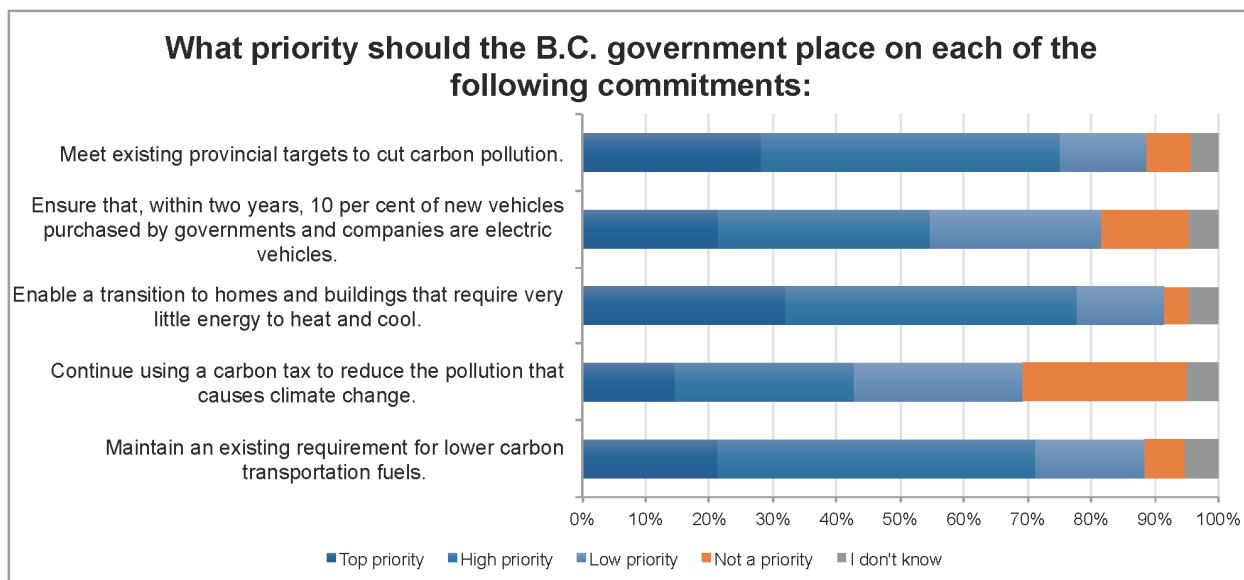
For each government commitment, respondents had the option of answering ‘top priority’, ‘high priority’, ‘low priority’, ‘not a priority’ and ‘I don’t know.’

² Globe Advisors and The Center for Climate Strategies, *The West Coast Clean Economy: Opportunities for investment and accelerated job creation* (Pacific Coast Collaborative, 2012). [http://www.pacificcoastcollaborative.org/Documents/Reports and Action Items/WCCE_Report_WEB_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pacificcoastcollaborative.org/Documents/Reports%20and%20Action%20Items/WCCE_Report_WEB_FINAL.pdf)

³ B.C.'s climate targets are 33 per cent below 2007 levels by 2020 and 80 per cent below by 2050. The province also has interim targets of 6 per cent below 2007 levels by 2012 and 18 per cent below by 2016.

Results

As shown below, at least 69 per cent of respondents considered all Action Plan commitments to be priorities.



Transitioning to buildings that require very little energy (91 per cent), meeting our provincial carbon pollution reduction targets (89 per cent) and maintaining B.C.'s existing requirement for low-carbon transportation fuels (88 per cent) were the commitments most considered priorities. Strong majorities also ranked as priorities the commitments to ensure 10 per cent of vehicles purchased by governments and companies are electric (82 per cent) and continuing to use a carbon tax (69 per cent).

Dissecting responses into top, high and low priorities followed a similar pattern to overall rankings. Homes and buildings that use very little energy received the most top priority rankings (32 per cent), followed by meeting existing carbon targets (28 per cent) and maintaining B.C.'s low-carbon fuel standard (21 per cent).

The number of British Columbians who do not view continuing the carbon tax to be a priority (26 per cent) is higher than for the other Action Plan commitments. Nonetheless, the majority of British Columbians see continuing the carbon tax as either a top (15 per cent), high (28 per cent) or low (27 per cent) priority.

Interpretation

Targets

Most respondents agreed the government should be meeting its targets to cut carbon pollution, highlighting a tension between public opinion and current government priorities. While early successes under B.C.'s Climate Action Plan enabled the province to hit its 2012 interim target⁴,

⁴ Ministry of Environment (British Columbia), *Climate Action in British Columbia: 2014 Progress Report* (2014). <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/cas/pdfs/2014-Progress-to-Targets.pdf>

policies to continue that progress are not yet in place. Further, multiple analyses⁵ have shown that B.C. targets are not achievable if three LNG terminals are developed by 2020, as the government intends.⁶

The B.C. government's 2014 Progress to Targets report indicates that new government actions will be required to meet future targets,⁷ but the government has yet to indicate how it plans to build on the initial success of the province's Climate Action Plan. Nor has it addressed the conflict that has been created between its legislated carbon pollution reduction targets and its LNG development goals.

Low priorities

It is worth considering how best to interpret 'low priority' as a response for a given commitment in the survey. It is distinct from 'not a priority,' but the level of effort respondents would expect government to take for a low priority compared with a high priority is less clear.

We interpreted low-priority rankings as adequate to maintain existing government actions, but inadequate to undertake new actions. The reason for this distinction is that new actions require design work within government (e.g., drafting new legislation or regulations) and engagement with impacted constituencies. This has occurred for actions that have already been implemented, meaning less effort from the government is needed to maintain these actions. Of the commitments tested in this poll, two are to maintain existing government actions (the carbon tax and low-carbon fuel standard) and two represent new actions (more electric vehicles and less home and building energy use).⁸

'Low priority' responses were highest for the electric vehicles commitment (27 per cent) and the carbon tax (27 per cent). For electric vehicles, a low-priority effort by government is unlikely to be successful. Nonetheless, this commitment received a higher percentage of top- and high-priority responses (55 per cent combined), indicating a majority of British Columbians would like to see more government action related to the uptake of electric vehicles by the government and companies in the province.

For the carbon tax commitment, minimal government action is required to maintain the policy — even a low-priority effort is likely adequate to ensure that the carbon tax continues in its current form. Combined, 69 per cent of responses were comprised of top-, high- and low-priority responses, indicating that a strong majority of British Columbians supports the province maintaining the policy.

⁵ For examples, see: 1) Matt Horne and Adam Goehner, *Wellhead to Waterline: Opportunities to limit greenhouse gas emissions from B.C.'s proposed LNG industry* (The Pembina Institute, 2014). <http://www.pembina.org/pub/2524>; and 2) Marc Lee, *BC's Legislated Greenhouse Gas Targets vs Natural Gas Development: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012). <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/natural-gas-ghgs>

⁶ The provincial government's LNG strategy calls for three terminals by 2020. Many of their economic and employment analyses have been based on scenarios with five to seven terminals operational by that time.

⁷ Ministry of Environment (British Columbia), *Climate Action in British Columbia: 2014 Progress Report* (2014). <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/cas/pdfs/2014-Progress-to-Targets.pdf>

⁸ Meeting the provincial targets to reduce carbon pollution straddles the two categories because the targets have already been legislated, but meeting them will require new actions.

Carbon tax

The one-quarter of respondents that are not supportive of continuing the carbon tax is consistent with results from similar questions in previous polls. Polling from the Pembina Institute and PICS, for example, found that around one-third (27 per cent in 2011 and 40 per cent in 2012)^{9,10} of British Columbians thought that the carbon tax and accompanying tax cuts had negative consequences for the province. Polling from Environics has tracked support for the carbon tax since its implementation and found that opposition has ranged from as high as 56 per cent in July 2008 to as low as 34 per cent in November 2012.¹¹

However, the same public opinion research shows that the policy continues to receive significant public support in the province. Separate research also shows that the carbon tax appears to be producing the outcomes it was designed to achieve. Recent analysis from Sustainable Prosperity shows positive economic and environmental outcomes — namely that B.C.'s per-capita fossil fuel combustion is dropping relative to the rest of Canada¹² while economic growth has not been negatively impacted.¹³

While it is difficult to imagine full support for the carbon tax — or any tax, for that matter — earlier polling indicated that dedicating a portion of the carbon tax to projects that help reduce carbon pollution is likely to increase public support for the carbon tax. For example, the 2012 polling commissioned by the Pembina Institute and PICS found that more than two-thirds of British Columbians would support future increases to the rate if the revenue raised was invested in projects like public transit and more energy efficient buildings.¹⁴ The same question indicated strong opposition (70 per cent) to increasing the tax if revenue was used to reduce corporate taxes. These results demonstrate that support for the carbon tax is partly dependent on how the revenue is used by government.

⁹ Matt Horne, *Measuring the Appetite for Climate Action in British Columbia: British Columbians' perspective on climate change and carbon taxes* (The Pembina Institute, 2011), 3. <http://www.pembina.org/pub/2233>

¹⁰ Tom Pedersen, Matt Horne and Kevin Sauvé, *British Columbians' perspectives on global warming and the carbon tax* (The Pembina Institute, 2012), 6. <http://www.pembina.org/pub/2376>

¹¹ Environics Institute, *Canadian public opinion about the BC carbon tax* (2013). <http://www.environicsinstitute.org/uploads/news/focus%20canada%202013%20-%20public%20opinion%20on%20bc%20carbon%20tax%20-%20december%2016-2013.pdf>

¹² B.C.'s use of fuels covered by the tax has fallen by 16.1% since 2008, when the carbon tax was introduced. See, Stewart Elgie, "Just the Facts: What's behind B.C.'s whopping fuel use drop?," *Sustainable Prosperity*, July 9, 2014. www.sustainableprosperity.ca/blogpost97

¹³ Stewart Elgie, "Just the Facts: Did the carbon tax shift burden or buoy B.C.'s economy?," *Sustainable Prosperity*, July 9, 2014. www.sustainableprosperity.ca/blogpost99

¹⁴ *British Columbians' perspectives on global warming and the carbon tax*, 5.