

Ontario's Coal Phase-out Gets Closer By Dan McDermott

Premier Kathleen Wynne's announcement that she would propose legislation to ban the generation of electricity through the burning of coal provides some level of confidence that Ontario's twice delayed coal phase-out may finally become fact. It has been a long journey and I have been on board for much of the ride. I joined Sierra Club in 1998 with a project, The OntAIRio Campaign, aimed at getting Ontario off coal.

Our province's doctors can claim the credit for getting the off-coal movement going in earnest. The Ontario Medical Association's (OMA) May 1998 report linking coal plant emissions to increases in asthma and other respiratory diseases firmly established the credibility of the environmental message to ban coal. Jack Gibbons' Ontario Clean Air Alliance was in action and pushing for an Ontario Government commitment to phase out its coal-fired power plants.

As a veteran of the acid rain struggle of the 80s (and that's a whole other story) I had been part of the movement that addressed that environmental crisis in its binational reality. Stopping acid rain in North America required cooperative action on the part of both Canada and the United States. US based coal-fired power plants were the primary source of acid gas emissions drifting into Canada and these same plants were sending their smog-causing NOx across our border and were responsible for roughly half of the pollution that Ontarians were inhaling in the late 90s. The key to the acid rain breakthrough had been aggressive action to reduce Canadian generated emissions initiated by then-and-now Ontario Minister of the Environment Jim Bradley. This Canadian "clean hands" approach eliminated the main US argument for inaction.

Only this time it was the US that was in the pollution reduction lead. Addressing a domestic demand for cleaner air, the US Government was in the process of forcing their coal plant operators to install expensive pollution control technology as the century drew to a close. By coincidence, a round of negotiations was scheduled to take place between the two countries in the context of the Canada-United States Air Quality Agreement, the same binational process that had secured acid rain causing SO2 reductions a decade earlier. The two parties were scheduled to meet in Ottawa in February 2000.

OntAIRio Campaign work in 1999 focused extensively on pushing Ontario to commit to an end to burning coal to create the same "clean hands" dynamic that had brought success in the fight against acid rain. To raise US awareness that transboundary pollution was a two-way street, we needed a concrete example of Canadian generated emissions impacting on a US community. This problem was solved when we discovered that the pollution path of emissions from Ontario's Nanticoke plant, located on the north shore of Lake Erie and the largest coal plant in North America, headed straight for Buffalo, New York. Our outreach to the Buffalo media resulted in a front page Buffalo News article and a TV piece featuring the South Park song "Blame Canada". Step one accomplished.

The second and most important step was to convince the Government of Canada of the benefits to be realized through an aggressive and bold approach to the looming negotiations with the US. The breakthrough was achieved when the Sierra Club, in conjunction with our OntAIRio Campaign partners, the Toronto Environmental Alliance and the David Suzuki Foundation presented our case to the staff of then Canadian Environment Minister David Anderson. We noted that if Minister Anderson simply agreed to match the new US coal plant standard, he would instantly become Canada's clean air champion. OntAIRio identified an additional sweetener for the Liberal Minister. His agreement to the US standard

would force compliance from Ontario with Conservative Premier Mike Harris ending up stuck with paying the bill.

The deal was reached in principle at the Ottawa meeting and released to an appreciative media. There was some predictable grumbling from the Harris Government but they were trapped in a box and they knew it. Adding the back-end technology necessary to achieve the reduction in emissions mandated by the binational agreement was going to cost billions of dollars. All that the Ontario Conservatives could do was to plead with the feds to contribute to covering the cost.

In September 2002, Ontario Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty committed to a complete coal phase-out in 2007. Within the year Mr. McGuinty was the new Ontario Premier and in position to make good on his pledge. There have indeed been bumps in the road to Ontario abandoning coal. After closing the Lakeview station in 2005, Premier McGuinty subsequently extended the phase out deadline to 2009, and then again, to 2014. The environmental community held its collective nose at the first extension but the second one provoked publicly stated concerns expressed by Sierra Club and others that the coal phase out commitment itself was in danger of abandonment.

It is fortunate that our worst fears were not realized. Progress toward taking coal units off-line have proceeded as scheduled. The commitment to backstopping this with the legislation proposed by Premier Wynne is another big step toward the fulfillment of the off-coal promise.

Sierra Club eagerly anticipates the day in 2014 when Ontario's last coal-fired unit goes cold. Then we will all breathe easier.