

Who's the dirtiest of them all?



What passes in western Canada for international political discourse on energy policy can resemble an argument between a pig and a camel about who smells better.

That's regrettable, because the West has an opportunity to lead — and profit — by example, rather than wallow in the mud slung by name-callers.

Lately, America has taken to calling our natural resources “dirty.” Causing the biggest uproar are claims that Alberta's oil sands make dirty oil. The fact that they produce a good deal of carbon emissions in the process of mining and refining has stirred the rage of environmentalists.

But the complaints don't stop at bitumen. Back in 2003, it was “dirty” cattle infected with mad cow disease. Northern border states have labelled Manitoba's hydroelectricity exports “dirty” because of flooding techniques. Even our softwood lumber exports are called “dirty” due to Canada's different forestry management practices.

The *coup de grâce* came earlier this year when *National Geographic* magazine ran a feature article on Alberta's oil sands. Even though the article itself was generally balanced, the photos were damning. Calgary oilmen were steaming mad.

There is a rising voice in America that seeks to legislate against imports of “dirty resources.”

Without question, this sentiment is more about US protectionism than anything resembling good stewardship of the planet's resources. Industry lobbyists have found themselves strange bedfellows with environmental groups like the Sierra Club, and both (for very different reasons) want to limit Canadian resource exports.

Alberta's energy sector has been known to take the position that the best defence is a good offence: “Oh, yeah? Well, your coal is worse than our oil sands. And if our oil isn't good enough for you, we'll build a pipeline to China and sell it to them.” It's the camel, arguing with the pig.

But this isn't a barnyard quarrel. This is a two-way trading relationship along what is still the world's longest undefended border. If Canada wants to be part of the solution in reducing global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, it needs to work with the US.

That dialogue germinated in February when President Obama visited Prime Minister Harper. There were encouraging signs of first steps, but so far no concrete plan has been hatched. Going forward, rather than simply pointing out America's carbon sins, Canada could take the negotiating lead by saying: “Yes, we can do better with our resources. But so can the US. Canada will put to work our creative energies and become the

world leader in technologies to reduce GHGs and generate new energy sources. Then we'll sell you the know-how.”

Our provincial and federal governments are, in fact, showing signs of doing just that. Despite faltering energy revenues, Alberta is bravely forging ahead with \$2 billion worth of encouragement for industry to find ways to make carbon sequestration and storage work.

Canada is, of course, the much smaller of the two, so it's tempting to assume that the negotiations will be stacked against us. The US bully will set all the rules — again.

On the other hand, this could really be Canada's chance to shine. Sure, America is not a country that likes to play follow the leader (unless it's the leader). But consider the situation in 2009: President Obama is busy trying to fix the global financial meltdown, the US economy is in tatters, and there's still that little skirmish in Iraq that needs tidying up. He's got his hands full.

Would it really be so naive for Canada to say to Obama: “Let us take the lead on this one”? Don't we all deserve better than a pile of slung, stinky mud?

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Carbon Sequestration

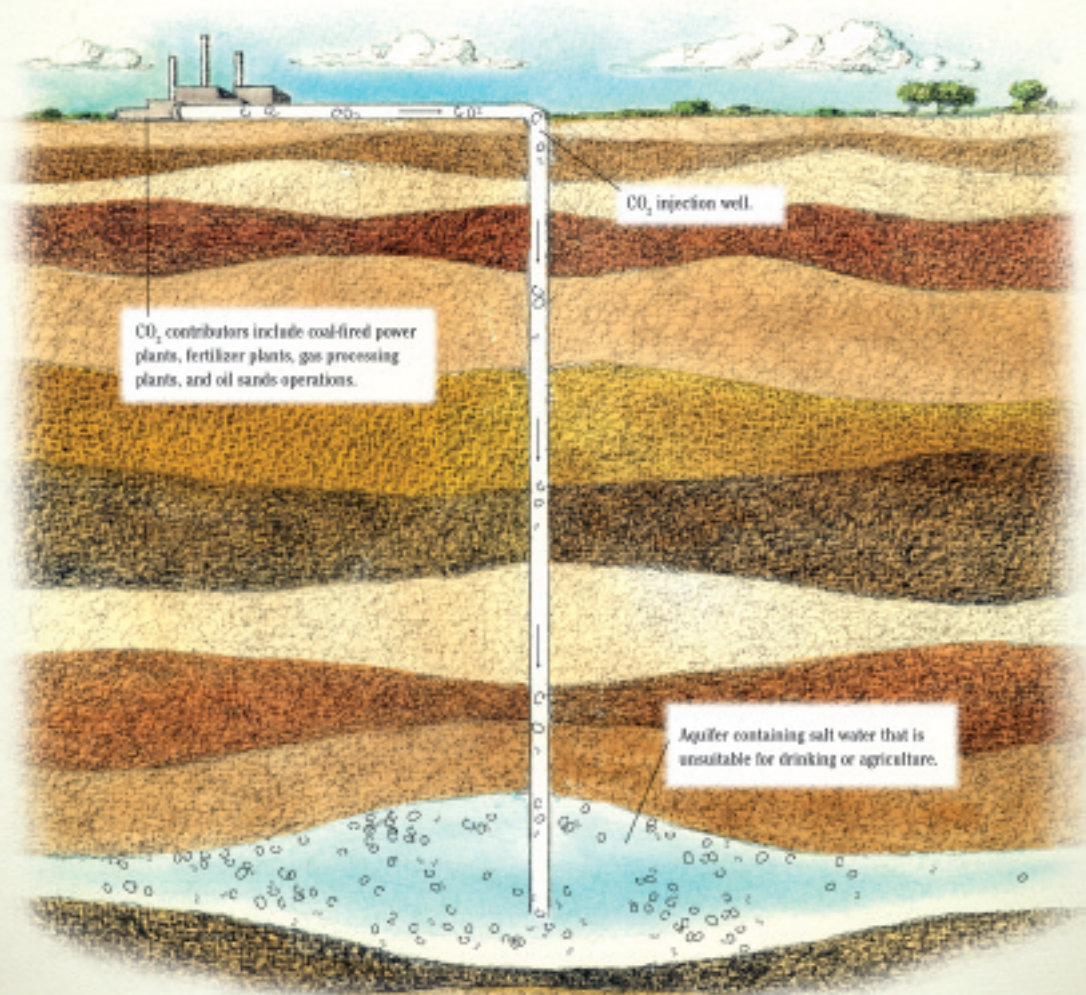
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