

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Coal

Ensuring coal never again threatens our air

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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When I was in my early teens I would look south toward Toronto in the early morning and see an orange-yellow haze covering the city. My father carpoled to Toronto and often commented that he'd be breathing that "stuff" all day long. "You don't breathe it so much as chew it," was a comment often heard.

By the time I was in my early 20s, the haze was no longer noticeable. Not that it had disappeared, but it now extended from Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe and covered us. All of us living north of Toronto were breathing that "stuff" all day long.

The results were predictable, just as experts had warned. Pollution, especially that created by burning coal, is known to cause lung disease. Asthma in young children went up as more and more coal was burned.

In fact, the World Health Organization issued a report in 2013 detailing classifying outdoor air pollution as carcinogenic to humans. I'm proud to say Ontario has officially ended its reliance on burning coal to create electricity.

And now it's time to ensure coal burning to create electricity doesn't make a comeback. Bill 9, An Act to amend the Environmental Protection Act to require the cessation of coal use to generate electricity at generation facilities has passed second reading and is well on its way to being passed by the Ontario Legislature.

What will Bill 9 mean for health?

Here's what George Habib, President and CEO of the Ontario Lung Association had to say back in July when the government brought the Bill forward: "Prohibiting coal-fired generating facilities means better health for everyone. It means fewer children being rushed to emergency departments with asthma attacks and fewer adults hospitalized due to flare-ups of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And it means significant savings for the Ontario economy."

Our government has delivered on its promise, to have Ontario's five coal-fired electricity generating stations at Atikokan, Lakeshore, Lampton, Nanticoke and Thunder Bay stop burning coal.

Ontario's action to eliminate coal-fired electricity is the single largest greenhouse gas reduction initiative in North America.

Phasing out coal-fired electricity generation is the equivalent to taking up to 7 million cars off the road when it comes to reducing greenhouse gases.

Ontario is now home to North America's largest power plant fuelled completely by biomass. Atikokan Generating Station, which employs 70 full-time workers, burned its last coal two years ago, on September 11, 2012.

Conversion of the station began in mid-2012 and included construction of two silos and boiler modifications to accommodate the biomass. The project employed over 200 highly skilled tradespeople and technical workers.

A coal-free energy mix will lead to a significant reduction in harmful emissions, cleaner air and a healthier environment.

The biomass used to fuel Atikokan Generating Station is being harvested and processed in Ontario. Domestic suppliers have leveraged this opportunity to secure contracts to provide biomass pellets to international buyers.

By eliminating coal power, the Ontario government is creating history by reducing sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions that pollute our air and cause diseases.

Cleaner air means healthier citizens. By taking positive steps in this direction, experts say Ontario has already realized an estimated \$4.4 billion in associated health, environmental and financial benefits from eliminating coal power in our province.

To the average resident of Newmarket-Aurora, this means we have had fewer smog days since closing coal plants. This means more sunny days we can enjoy with our families. It means no more "chewing the air" we breathe.

In eliminating coal power as an energy source, Ontario has become a leader in combating climate change in North America, and we have no plans to stop. By putting this law into effect, Ontario will be sending a strong signal both nationally and internationally that we are serious about the fight against climate change. It will be the first of a series of steps that will lead to a full strategy to combat climate change.

With coal power gone, we are pursuing better alternative energy options: cleaner, renewable and future-oriented. Already 80 per cent of our energy options come from sources such as water, nuclear and renewables.

As we shift away from fossil fuels "dirty, non-renewable sources" Ontario has the prospect of becoming a leader in clean technology. This year was an interesting year because, for the first time, green energy in Canada and the clean-tech/green-energy sector exceeded

the oil sands for employment. Some 23,700 people now work in green energy versus 22,340 in the oil sands.

The importance of this bill is to ensure the health and environmental benefits that come from eliminating coal power are protected by legislation.

This is an important piece of legislation. Bill 9, An Act to amend the Environmental Protection Act to require the cessation of coal use to generate electricity at generation facilities must be passed for the sake of our children's health, for our economy and our environment.

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