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## New Sustainable Development Act has its limits


**Roy Ostling, Oceanside Star**

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Canada's Federal Sustainable Development Act became law on June 26, 2008 with little fanfare and limited coverage in the media. This seems unusual for legislation that requires the federal government to create and put into action a government-wide sustainable development strategy and regularly evaluate the environmental consequences of its actions.

Liberal MP John Godfrey, who introduced the Sustainable Development Act last fall as a private member's bill, claims the legislation reflects Parliament's "deep commitment to the environment" and is a "significant step to making Canada an international leader in becoming a green nation."

But serious questions remain about whether the new law can deliver on those lofty sentiments.

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The law's overarching principle is that "sustainable development is based on an ecologically efficient use of natural, social and economic resources and acknowledges the need to integrate environmental, economic and social factors in the making of all decisions by government."

David Suzuki, whose foundation helped draft the legislation, says that it could revolutionize the way the government deals with national environmental issues and that finally the government is listing the environment right up there with the economy.

There are several positive aspects of the Federal Sustainable Development Act. These include setting and reviewing scientifically measurable sustainability targets, the plans to meet the targets, and annual reporting on the government's performance.

Unfortunately, the interpretations section of Sustainable Development Act has some serious flaws. It defines sustainability as "the capacity of a thing, action, activity, or process to be maintained indefinitely," and this is sound. But it uses the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development -- that which meets the needs of the present without compromising those of future generations to meet their needs. In using this definition, the government omits the environment's limited capacity to fulfill those needs.

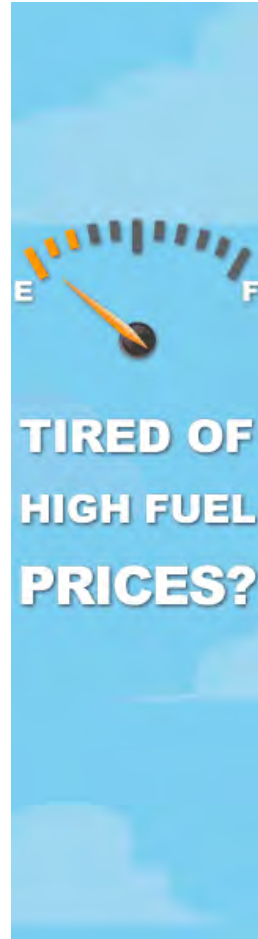
Once again, implicit in the federal government's concept of sustainable development is the position that we can have our cake and eat it too. They tell us that we can continue to develop and grow our economy without degrading our environment. This ignores evidence that we are already exceeding the Earth's capacity to meet our demand for the goods and services that our environment provides by over 25%. Furthermore, it fails to recognize that economic growth is responsible for 65% of the increase in greenhouse gas emissions since 2000.

It's encouraging that the precautionary principle applies to Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and its goals and targets. The principle, however, is watered down by stating "where there are threats of irreversible damage, lack of scientific certainty shall not be used as reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."

The question is: why would a government initiative that poses irreversible damage to the environment proceed in the first place?

Easy access to information on the Federal Sustainable Development Act on the Government of Canada website (canada.gc.ca) is lacking. The GreeningGovernment (www.greeninggovernment.gc.ca) site provides links to the 25 departments and agencies required to prepare sustainable development strategies. It also tells us we are all responsible for sustainability and setting an example.

If our federal government is serious about setting an example and showing international leadership in becoming a green nation, it could start by addressing the conflict between policies that promote continued economic growth and development and achieving sustainability. Devoting some serious consideration



and resources to exploring the possibility of moving to a steady state economy, one which is in balance with the capacity of Canada's and the world's ecosystems to supply resources and absorb our wastes, would be a good place to start.

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