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Unpacking the Housing Numbers: How Much New Social Housing is BC Building?

By Seth Klein and
Lorraine Copas

British Columbians are distressed by the rise in homelessness in our society, yet we too often feel resigned. Older British Columbians remember a time when homelessness was unusual, but we have accepted today's reality as the new normal, as somehow inevitable.

But there is no great mystery behind the emergence of widespread homelessness in BC. While many factors are at play—a high-cost rental housing market, a private sector market that works better for high-end condo development, low wages, addiction and mental health problems, and gaps in the social safety net—there is also the simple fact that as a society we used to be considerably better at bringing new affordable housing units on-line every year.

Earlier this month, CCPA-BC and the Social Planning and Research Council of BC published a new report that uses the BC government's own service plan data to put together a picture of where we have seen concrete action on the housing front, and where action has been in short supply.

KEY FINDINGS

Most of the increased government support in recent years has been focused in three areas: rental assistance supplements, new emergency shelter beds, and the purchase of existing SRO (single room occupancy) hotels. While these initiatives



Vacant buildings at the now-demolished Little Mountain Social Housing Development in Vancouver. Photo: Terra Poirier.

are helpful and laudable, they do not create actual new low-income housing units.

Overall, the number of households assisted by provincial housing programs increased by approximately 11,530 over the last five years. However:

- Of this increase, 63 per cent (7,270 households) can be attributed to rental assistance to families through the Rental Assistance Program, while another 1,010 are individuals assisted through the Homeless Rent Supplement (not actual new supply of housing);
- Another 1,420 of the total increase are new emergency shelter beds (not housing units); and
- 1,550 of the “new” supportive housing units for homeless people with mental health and addiction problems are in the purchased SRO hotels (rather than actual new low-income housing supply).

There has been a genuine growth of supply in some areas, such as about 1,500 units of new supportive housing for the homeless, and housing for frail seniors. But against these increases, the province has seen a loss of 2,820 traditional low-income social housing units.

Taken together, the government's own data indicate an overall net increase of only 280 actual social housing units over the past five years, a sobering and concerning finding.

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In contrast, between the mid-1970s and early 1990s, with the help of the federal government, BC created between 1,000 and 1,500 new units of social housing per year.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL HOUSING

The need for a greater supply of social, supportive, low-income and affordable housing is clear:

- Waiting lists for social housing indicate that the demand for publicly subsidized housing far outweighs the supply—BC Housing, the provider of social housing across BC, had over 13,400 applicants on its waitlist in May 2008.
- In Metro Vancouver alone more than 2,600 individuals were homeless on the night of the last count (a “snapshot” based on a single night and therefore no doubt an under-count) in March 2008, a 22 per cent increase since the previous count in 2005, and a 137 per cent increase over 2002.
- In the province as a whole, according to a 2008 study by SFU’s Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addictions, BC had 11,750 people with severe addictions and/or mental illness who were “absolutely homeless.”
- Many families and individuals with housing are in a precarious situation, paying a very large share of their income on shelter. According to the most recent Census, BC has the worst record of housing affordability

The government’s own data indicate an overall net increase of only 280 actual social housing units over the past five years. In contrast, between the mid-1970s and early 1990s, with the help of the federal government, BC created between 1,000 and 1,500 new units of social housing per year.

in Canada, with almost one in three renter households spending 30 per cent or more of their gross household income on housing costs. Core housing need estimates prepared by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) show there are more than 133,000 renter households across BC in core housing need (i.e. spending at least 30 per cent of their income on shelter) with almost half of these households spending 50 per cent or more of their income on shelter.

LESS HOUSING BEING BUILT

One of the major challenges today is that the demand for social housing far exceeds the supply of new units being created. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s the federal government was a major partner in providing funding for new public and social housing programs. Information published by CMHC shows that in the 10 to 15 years prior to the 1993 withdrawal of federal funding for new social housing development, there were an average of 15,000 to 16,000 new social housing units added each year across Canada—1,000 to 1,500 of them in BC (not including co-op units and special needs housing).

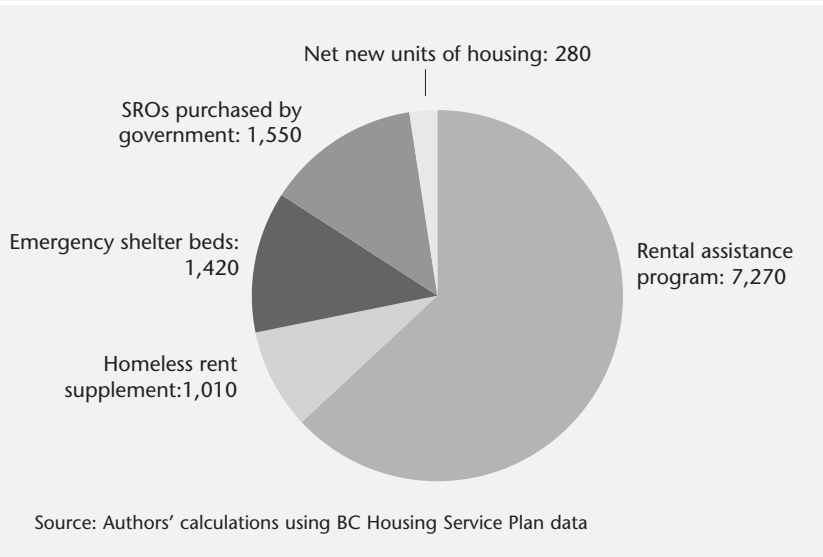
To a large extent, we still live with the legacy of that era. However, since 1993 two significant shifts have contributed to the housing affordability and homelessness crisis we see today: the way we define subsidized housing and the type of investments being made.

NEW DEFINITION OF SUBSIDIZED HOUSING

To a large extent, the continuum of housing in BC Housing’s service plan no longer represents what was traditionally understood as social housing. Rather, “social housing” covers a much broader set of initiatives, including the purchase of single room occupancy hotel units, assisted living, supported housing, emergency shelter beds and rent assistance for renters in the private market, as well as independent social housing.

The province has also shifted towards a “housing-plus” approach: all funding for new units has gone toward housing with supports—either supportive housing for homeless people with addictions and/or mental health challenges, or assisted living for seniors. This shift has resulted in a transfer of costs previously provided by other ministries,

Figure 1: Net increase in BC households assisted 2006/07 to 2010/11



Climate Justice, Green Jobs and Sustainable Production in BC

By Marc Lee and Kenneth I. Carlaw

To fight against catastrophic climate change, BC needs to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to near zero by mid-century at the latest. This amounts to a new, green, industrial revolution that will have transformative impacts on work in the province.



Past industrial revolutions have caused great upheaval and hardship, with some sectors of society bearing a terrible burden. If this green industrial revolution is to occur in a socially just manner, we need to help workers make the transition to new employment, and provide economically marginalized people with new opportunities for decent work and to obtain economic security.

Green jobs are well-paid, decent jobs that contribute to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, produce no or low environmental impact, and/or help the economy or society adapt to the impacts of climate change. Creating green jobs allows us not only to confront climate change, but also to achieve climate justice.

Currently, four-fifths of BC's commercial and industrial (non-household) GHG emissions come from a handful of sectors: mining, oil and gas, transportation and manufacturing. The biggest culprit is the oil and gas industry, which provides very little direct employment in spite of its substantial emissions.

BC's emissions profile emphasizes its history as a "staples economy" driven by the extraction and export of unprocessed or semi-processed raw materials. The BC government's industrial policies have supported growth in the resource sector by providing transportation infrastructure (roads, bridges and ports), tax breaks and low-cost electricity, but are now in conflict with climate policies.

A key challenge moving forward is that highly paid unionized jobs in the resource sector may be decent but are often not green. Service sector jobs often show the opposite pattern: they have a small carbon footprint, but are low paying and provide little job satisfaction. For a green industrial revolution to fulfill its potential, green jobs must be synonymous with decent work.

This means green job strategies must include "just transition" plans that support workers as they

change careers or sectors, in addition to a wide range of new job opportunities actively engaged in greening the economy. Green job creation should be actively linked to gains for traditionally disadvantaged populations, including apprenticeship training for women, visible minorities, immigrants and Aboriginal people. Commitments to provide income-support transfers (a "carbon transfer") will be required to guard against adverse impacts for low-income households, while simultaneously supporting the demand for investments in energy efficiency and low-emissions transportation.

Green job creation is a natural outcome of rebuilding BC's physical infrastructure (i.e., buildings, communities, transportation systems and energy sources) and reconstructing BC's industrial composition (i.e., transition from staples to high-value-added clean energy driven production) to be more sustainable. Many public service jobs (civil service, health care work or early childhood education, for example) could also be considered a major source of inherently green jobs. These green investments create many more jobs than investments in fossil fuel industries.

NEW BUILDING CONSTRUCTION AND RETROFITS

The ideal for green residential, commercial and institutional buildings in the future is "net zero energy"—buildings that are hyper-efficient and generate any electricity they require. A major initiative to fund coordinated education and training programs could develop BC's knowledge capital in this area and ensure a supply of skilled workers. There are also opportunities to develop local green jobs in the production of windows, heat pumps and other parts currently imported from Europe and Asia.

While net zero is an ideal for new development, the reality is that housing stock takes a very long

Green job creation should be actively linked to gains for traditionally disadvantaged populations, including apprenticeship training for women, visible minorities, immigrants and Aboriginal people.

Lack of Water Data a Cause for Public Concern

By Ben Parfitt

In our high-speed digital world, there is no excuse for regulators failing to post and update information that is readily available to them and of evident public interest.

This is especially true when the fate of vitally important, publicly-owned assets such as water hangs in the balance. To have faith that water resources are managed responsibly, basic facts must be known. Who has approved access to water? How much do they have access to? And where do they get it?

As the gatekeeper for information on the booming water usage in British Columbia’s natural gas sector, the BC Oil and Gas Commission (OGC) has the answers to such questions and a whole bunch more. That’s because the OGC has statutory authority to issue short-term water-use permits to natural gas companies. Because of that, the OGC can tell you which companies hold water rights, the name of the creek, river, lake or reservoir that the water rights pertain to, what the maximum daily water withdrawal limits are for individual permits, and even the coordinates that will allow you to find a particular water source (in many cases an unnamed creek) on a map.

But the OGC does not post such essential information on its website, and has actually suggested to members of the public that have requested such information that it may be difficult and costly to retrieve.

None of this makes sense. Far more complex data is maintained by other provincial government agencies and is readily available. If you go to the Harvest Billing System at <https://www15.for.gov.bc.ca/hbs/>, for example, you can learn more than you may care to about what is logged in British Columbia—by company, by type of tree, and by whether the trees were logged on public or private lands. You can even learn how much usable wood companies elect to leave behind at logging sites rather than truck to mills, or what individual

companies pay in fees to the provincial government for the trees they log on public lands.

You may need a bit of guidance to search the database. But a helpful public servant—at a contact number listed on the webpage—will gladly guide you through the steps. That’s how seriously the provincial government views the public’s right to know when it comes to forests.

When it comes to simple, baseline information on water, however, such transparency is nowhere to be seen on the OGC’s website.

This does not inspire confidence, and at the worst possible time—when the fossil fuel-rich northeast corner of BC is experiencing unusually severe droughts.

The oil and gas industry is the only industry in British Columbia that gains access to water without Ministry of Environment approval. All other users—from municipal water plants, to aluminum and iron smelters, to pulp and paper mills, to farmers irrigating their fields—obtain short-term or long-term water allocations from the provincial ministry responsible for protecting our environment.

The preferential status bestowed to the energy sector inevitably breeds suspicion. Such suspicion only grows when information that ought to be readily available is not.

The OGC is more than aware that escalating water usage by natural gas companies has the potential to become a thorny public policy issue. Particularly as companies engage in increased usage of “hydraulic fracturing” or “fracking” operations to unlock gas trapped in deeply buried shale formations. Such operations pump enormous quantities of water at thousands of pounds per square inch of pressure to fracture or break seams in the underground rock, thereby releasing the trapped gas.

To assuage concerns about such water usage, the OGC recently released a report on the topic (see www.ogc.gov.bc.ca). But reading the document simply reinforces the impression that the public

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Job Creation Alone Will Not Solve BC's Poverty Problem

By Iglia Ivanova

Whenever he's confronted with questions about BC's record high child poverty rates or the growing income inequality in the province, our Premier maintains that the best social policy is a job. In fact, reducing the costs of doing business in BC seems to be this government's chief economic strategy.

Consider the HST, for example, which the government famously described as "the most important thing we can do for the economy" because it lowers the costs of business investment by \$1.9 billion per year. The government chose to tax consumers more in order to keep the shift revenue neutral, instead of raising the lost revenue with other business taxes.

While corporate and small business tax rates are getting smaller by the year, the minimum wage has not budged since 2001 and is now the lowest in Canada.

The intuition behind this economic strategy is that lower business taxes and relaxed workers' rights make it easier for firms to reap higher profits, thus encouraging them to set up locally. This in turn creates jobs for the local population and brings about economic growth. Jobs and economic growth are expected to, well, "lift all boats," as the saying goes.

Unfortunately, the type of jobs created by business-friendly measures are often not the stable, well-paying jobs that people need to support themselves and their families. As a result, the economic growth that's generated tends to benefit a small minority. In BC, we've seen this clearly over the last 25 years, when economic growth was strong yet poverty remained largely unchanged and income inequality increased substantially.

A recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report confirms that job creation is not the be all and end all of social and economic policy. The report, *OECD Employment Outlook: Tackling the Jobs Crisis*, devotes an entire 45-page chapter to the question "Is work the best antidote to poverty?"

The OECD researchers show that while employment considerably reduces the risk of poverty, simply having a job is not a guaranteed path out

of poverty. On average in the OECD, 7 per cent of people living in households with at least one worker were poor. In Canada, this number was higher, 9 per cent.

Working poverty is so widespread that it accounted for close to 70 per cent of all poor people in Canada even during the economic boom of the mid-2000s (roughly the same as the OECD average).

This OECD report is just the latest confirmation of something that social policy researchers have known for a long time: even a robust economic recovery will not eliminate poverty and social exclusion without a comprehensive, government-led poverty reduction plan.

What kind of poverty reduction policies do the OECD recommend? The report acknowledges that poverty is a complex social problem and country-specific factors need to be taken into account, but it argues that "social transfers play a key role, precisely because they can be targeted towards the most vulnerable households: on average in the OECD area, they reduce by almost half the rate of in-work poverty."

On this front, Canada can and should be doing a lot better. Other OECD reports, such as the 2007 *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*, have documented that social transfers in Canada became less generous between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, so it should not come as a surprise that our poverty rates (including working poverty) have grown. BC has been among the worst performers in the country on these measures.

It's clear that job creation is an important goal, especially at the tail-end of a deep recession, but it should not be pursued single-mindedly, without concern for the workers' economic security or their ability to earn enough to afford the basics like housing, child care, education and training upgrades.

The type of jobs created matters a lot, which is why the OECD calls for increased training opportunities for those who have lost their jobs as a result of the recession. They suggest shifting "the focus and resources behind activation from the 'work-first' approach which tended to dominate prior to the crisis to a 'train-first' approach for those at high risk of long-term unemployment."

Indeed, access to education and training opportunities throughout the life cycle can greatly improve a person's employment options and

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time to turn over. A key green jobs strategy, therefore, is to start with retrofits of existing buildings. Because so many buildings need energy efficiency upgrades, and this is local, labour-intensive work, building retrofits are the low-hanging fruit of green job development.

ZERO-EMISSION TRANSPORTATION

A massive expansion of public transit should form a major part of a green jobs plan. Expansion of transit capacity is directly linked to new green jobs: the creation of new transit lines and transit vehicles will produce employment gains in construction and green manufacturing. Over the long run, a zero-emissions transportation system must be rooted in more complete communities, where high-density housing is located close to public and private services and amenities.

GREEN MANUFACTURING

BC needs to make existing manufacturing operations more environmentally friendly, develop new local manufacturing capacity to reduce our dependency on imported goods, and work toward “closed-loop” production processes that exploit BC’s abundant clean hydro energy and recycle and reuse wastes. If BC recycled its waste products locally instead of exporting them to other jurisdictions, “closing the loop” would greatly reduce emissions and provide many new opportunities for green jobs.

RESEARCH INTO NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Long-term economic and employment strategies must also consider the development of new technologies. These may be necessary for the final percentage points of GHG reductions that take BC to zero emissions. The future path of any technology is impossible to predict, of course, but the decades to come offer the potential for major breakthroughs in areas like biotechnology, nanotechnology and quantum computing, all of which have massive potential for implementation in a green industrial production system. BC should be positioned to adopt and adapt green applications of these technologies, which requires a building of the technical skills and knowledge capabilities of workers in BC.

ADAPTATION PLANNING

There will also be new work in adapting to a climate-changed province. We can develop strategies that improve our resilience to climate change in ways that create green jobs, build physical infrastructure and reinvigorate social networks. Adaptation-related jobs could include reinforcing dykes in low-lying areas, planting trees in areas decimated by the mountain pine beetle and upgrading storm sewers and water treatment facilities.

The development of more localized, sustainable food systems is a key aspect of resilience planning, as climate change may affect global food supply chains, and conventional agriculture is highly dependent on fossil fuels. Beyond sufficient food production, a planning framework that focuses on ensuring basic needs should also address water, housing and electricity at regional and community levels.

A GREEN SOCIAL CONTRACT

Fear of job loss could have a paralyzing impact on progress towards GHG emissions mitigation. On balance, there will be a net increase in jobs—if public and private investments can be leveraged to develop green jobs. In the vast majority of cases, skills will be readily transitioned to other needed work that will be created in green industries.

The term “social contract” is generally used to describe the agreement, written or assumed, between a government and the citizens it governs. A “green social contract” would guide a government to prioritize both the environment and the well-being of its citizens in any decision-making process, and would include strategies for helping workers transition to green jobs and protect against widespread unemployment.

Marc Lee and Kenneth I. Carlaw are co-authors of Climate Justice, Green Jobs and Sustainable Production in BC, published as part of the Climate Justice Project, a research alliance led by CCPA-BC and the University of BC, and supported primarily by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through its Community-University Research Alliance program.

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Fossil Fuel Peddling Impedes BC's Progress Toward a Green Future

By Marc Lee

Based primarily on the creation of a carbon tax two years ago, the BC government has been propelled into the position of North American climate action leader. While there was much to applaud as first steps on climate action in BC's 2008 "green" budget, two years later there remain some glaring contradictions between climate action and BC's transportation and industrial policies.



In particular, British Columbians need to have a frank conversation about the province's fossil fuel industries. We are all addicted to the energy provided by cheap and abundant fossil fuels, and so have reshaped our economy and society in fundamentally unsustainable ways.

But BC is more than just another addict; it is also a dealer. When it comes to law and order, we have learned not to crack down on the users of drugs, but instead focus our efforts on the dealers. So what if it turns out that beautiful BC is running the resource economics equivalent of a meth lab?

The extraction and processing of fossil fuels (oil, natural gas and coal) was responsible for one-fifth of BC's emissions in 2007. But the footprint of BC's fossil fuel production is actually much larger because official inventories only count emissions released within the borders of a jurisdiction. The combustion of coal, oil and gas outside BC in export markets is not counted. As a result, the emissions attributable to BC's fossil fuel industries in the province's official inventory are vastly understated.

In 2008, natural gas and coal together hit a record \$8.5 billion in BC exports (with the recession, this fell to \$6 billion in 2009). While BC has become a more diversified and service-oriented economy, resource extraction remains a major part of the provincial economy and a large source of export revenues, and as a result continues to dominate thinking in Victoria.

Converted to tonnes of carbon dioxide exported, BC natural gas and coal exports combined for 104 million tonnes of carbon dioxide elsewhere—more than double the emissions from fossil fuel combustion within BC, and 7.6 times BC's own emissions from the extraction and processing of those fossil fuels.

More troubling are plans for expansion. The BC government is putting oil and gas at the top of its industrial policy priority list, highlighted by a recent \$404 million auction of land for exploration of shale gas in the Northeast. BC has extensive stockpiles of CO₂ awaiting release into the atmosphere—if extracted. In fact, BC's fossil fuel reserves represent more than three years of global CO₂ emissions.

A reality check comes from estimates of the world's carbon budget—the total stock of emissions that can be emitted between now and 2050 by everyone worldwide, consistent with a reasonable probability of keeping global temperature increase under 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Above 2 degrees Celsius, it is widely believed that humans lose the ability to stop climate change, and runaway global warming could be the result. This global carbon budget is estimated to be just over 1 trillion tonnes of CO₂.

BC's fossil fuel reserves are equivalent to nearly one-tenth of the world's remaining carbon budget. It seems clear that the status quo of extracting and exporting fossil fuels cannot continue. BC's fossil fuel resources are not going anywhere, and will only be worth more as time goes on. Given the sheer urgency of getting over our addiction to fossil fuels, this inevitably means a moratorium on new oil and gas development is needed—unless 100 per cent of the emissions can be captured and stored underground. Forever.

An important social justice concern in taking an aggressive approach to fossil fuel extraction is the negative impact on many workers in those industries, and the communities they live in. While there is a strong case to be made for new green jobs in renewable energy, the promise of green jobs in the future is not the same as a good job

BC has extensive stockpiles of CO₂ awaiting release into the atmosphere—if extracted. In fact, BC's fossil fuel reserves represent more than three years of global CO₂ emissions.

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Unpacking the housing numbers

such as health. Limited housing dollars are now being directed toward these more intensive types of housing.

The need for such supported/assisted housing is clear. But it has come at the expense of basic (and less costly) social housing for those who simply struggle with low incomes. Not only have there been limited investments in increasing the supply of basic social housing, but some of the new supportive/assisted housing represents the conversion of basic social housing into “housing-plus” —leaving even fewer units for low-income families and seniors.

Ironically, social service providers have also reported that some people end up staying in more costly supportive housing for longer than they need to because there are no basic affordable housing units into which they can “graduate.” For example, after a period of crisis and the need for higher-intensity services and supports, many individuals with mental health or addiction challenges would be able to live independently with a lower level of support if these units were available.

Government figures indicate that it costs about \$250 million to build 1,000 units of supportive housing. If BC wanted to add 2,000 units of new social housing per year, the annual cost would be about \$500 million. Surely in a province as wealthy as ours, that is not asking too much to end the homeless crisis in our society.

This article is an excerpt from Unpacking the Numbers: How much social housing is BC building? by Seth Klein and Lorraine Copas and co-published by CCPA-BC and SPARC. Available at www.policyalternatives.ca.

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Job creation alone

ultimately boosts the productivity of the economy as a whole. Investments in training and education partially pay for themselves with the extra tax revenue collected from higher paid workers. Yet such investments are largely missing from BC government’s one-sided labour market approach.

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Lack of water data

is largely in the dark about the industry’s water consumption.

At one point, the OGC says that “a preliminary look” at water usage by natural gas companies operating in one shale gas-rich region of BC known as the Horn River Basin found that the companies used “less than five per cent” of what they were allocated.

Putting aside what a “preliminary look” means, the report presents no figures on what water was assigned in the Horn River Basin versus what was actually used.

Once again, this does not inspire confidence.

As the regulator responsible for issuing water permits to energy companies, the OGC can easily post information on water allocations. It can also, if it chooses, post information on what the companies report using by way of the water assigned to them.

Such basic accounting information is an essential prerequisite to the sustainable management of water resources. As such, it properly belongs in the public domain.

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Fossil fuel peddling

today. The BC should therefore make serious commitments to a “green social contract” for affected workers, including income supports, retraining provisions and mobility allowances.

Confronting GHG emissions from the oil and gas sector, and emissions from fossil fuel exports that are combusted in other jurisdictions, is perhaps the biggest challenge BC faces, and the most glaring contradiction when it comes to climate policy. This challenge, and its social justice transitional issues, must be acknowledged if BC is to be a real climate action leader.

Marc Lee is Senior Economist with the BC Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Co-Director of the Climate Justice Project, a five-year partnership with the University of British Columbia looking at the social justice aspects of climate action policies. His recently released brief, Peddling GHGs: What is the Carbon Footprint of BC’s Fossil Fuel Exports? is available for download at www.policyalternatives.ca.

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