

Low-carbon future means driving less, Conference Board says

Fuel efficiency and technology improvements will lower greenhouse gas emissions, but not enough

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New zero-emissions cars and gains in fuel efficiency won't be enough for Canada to meet climate change targets for road transport, a Conference Board of Canada study says.

Instead, Canadians will have to change their habits to drive less and governments will have to encourage people to use more sustainable forms of transportation.

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The report, titled "A Long Hard Road" and released Thursday, attempts to map out how Canada can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent from 1990 levels, as recommended by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Transportation emissions account for about 28 per cent of total greenhouse gas emissions in Canada, with the majority coming from road transport, including light passenger vehicles and freight trucks. Total emissions have risen since 1990.

An 80 per cent reduction in Canada's road transportation emissions by 2050 would require a reduction of approximately 117.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions from 2013 levels.

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That's a more ambitious target than Canada committed to do under the 2009 Copenhagen accord (17 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020), but more in line with the targets Canadian leaders may have to agree to at the coming Paris climate summit if the world is to escape warming by two degrees Celsius.

"To achieve the 80-by-50 target, Canada will need to implement a co-ordinated approach that, in addition to focusing on technological improvements, includes initiatives that reduce demand for road transportation," the Conference Board report says.

Fuel efficiency not enough

Until recently, federal government efforts in the transport sector have focused on improving fuel efficiency for both freight and light vehicles.

But as the carbon intensity of vehicles has decreased, Canadians are driving more and opting for larger vehicles such as SUVs and pickup trucks. In addition, a growing economy and population means more vehicles on the roads.

So while fuel efficiency standards that get progressively tougher until 2050 are necessary, they won't be enough to reduce emissions, the report says.

Even new technologies, such as biofuels, compressed-gas-powered vehicles, hydrogen, electric and hybrids won't bring Canada in range of its emissions targets, the report says.

But the toughest challenge will be to get Canadians to give up their love affair with the car. The reports recommends everyone try to drive less and shift to public transit, cycling or walking.

Challenge to change habits


"Reducing activity levels presents a significant challenge in Canada as society continues to evolve around private automobiles and as commodity exports continue to grow," the report says.

Those kinds of changes mean expensive investment in infrastructure such as improving public transit, but also in making urban areas safer for pedestrians and cyclists. It also demands that people live closer to where they work.

The burden of that kind of urban planning will fall to cities, and some have already begun setting targets. For example, Vancouver plans to have half of all trips on foot, bike or transit by 2020.

And then there's the suggestion that people simply travel less — work from home, make just one shopping trip per week and plan their lives to not require long commutes.

"Defining a broad target and leaving society to work out the details will not be sufficient," the report concludes. It calls on all levels of government and industry to co-ordinate efforts to move toward a low-carbon transportation sector.

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