

Pull the plug on false promise of carbon offsets

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We've said before that the Pacific Carbon Trust should be shut down.

Vancouver Sun reporters and others have looked at some of the products it has been peddling to taxpayers and found them to have little value.

That finding has now been confirmed by B.C. Auditor General John Doyle. Sadly, rather than accept that finding, the provincial government is continuing to defend this waste of millions of tax dollars and the misguided public policy it represents.

The Pacific Carbon Trust was set up in 2008 as part of then-premier Gordon Campbell's climate plan. It was tasked with supporting a market for trading carbon offsets. So far, however, almost all of the customers are from the public sector. They include schools, hospitals, universities, and other taxpayer-funded institutions - all of which have been driven to the PCT on orders from the province.

The beneficiaries have largely been private companies, including energy giant Encana.

The idea of offsets is that individuals, companies or public bodies that want to achieve carbon neutrality - that is to run their operations without adding to the problem of climate change - but can't cut their own greenhouse gas emissions to zero can provide the money needed for someone else to cut back, someone that would not have been able to achieve the reduction without the money being paid for the offsets.

What Vancouver Sun reporters and others outside the industry found when they looked at some of the offsets being bought and sold was that they were not really achieving the real reductions claimed.

The auditor general looked at two projects that together accounted for nearly 70 per cent of the offsets needed by the provincial government to achieve carbon neutrality. One was a grant to Encana to reduce flaring, and the other was to the Nature Conservancy in a deal to protect a forested property called Darkwoods.

Doyle confirmed what others had also seen, that the two projects would have or could have proceeded without the approximately \$6 million they received from taxpayers through the Pacific Carbon Trust.

The board of directors at the Pacific Carbon Trust and B.C. Environment Minister Terry Lake both rejected Doyle's finding.

We can understand why. In the case of the PCT, the unmasking of the offsets as having little environmental value suggests that the work they do is worthless, that taxpayers are being milked millions of dollars that could be used for health care, education and other basic services to purchase what is the green equivalent of snake oil.

Their professional reputations and their salaries are at stake.

For the Liberal government, the finding that the offsets have little value cuts the legs out from under the province's claim to be carbon neutral. So Lake's reluctance to accept the finding is easily understood, even while it has to be seen as irresponsible.

A more constructive course of action would be to accept the finding and try to salvage what value there is in the Pacific Carbon Trust. The crown agency should be wound down, the millions sitting in its bank accounts should be taken back into the provincial treasury, and the expertise that it has developed for assessing carbon emissions should be brought back into the government.

Reducing emissions is still a useful goal. But rather than use tax dollars to pay for an external bureaucracy whose main function has been to subsidize private business, those dollars should be used to invest in government operations, in making schools and hospitals more energy efficient, and to improve public transit.

Given the stance Lake has taken, we expect no action will be taken until after the next election. Whichever party forms the government, the course of action is clear. The Pacific Carbon Trust should be vaporized.

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