

Stuck in neutral

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USING financial incentives to force people to "do the right thing" isn't a bad idea in theory. One sure way to motivate action is through the wallet. If you have to pay for your bad behaviour, your behaviour will usually change sooner than later.

That theory has much to do with the province's carbon neutral program, brought in at a time before economic woes overshadowed the fate of the earth on most political agendas.

The idea of carbon offsets isn't bad - money charged for environmentally bad behaviour goes to pay for projects that will counteract those deeds.

But in a blistering report released this week, B.C.'s Auditor General John Doyle questioned whether two major projects funded by the province's carbon offsets did much to save the planet.

He concluded that both the Encanna gas drilling project and Darkwoods forestry project would have gone ahead regardless of offset funding and that their environmental worth was overvalued.

These are serious criticisms, because without that legitimacy, the whole carbon offset process runs the risk of becoming a kind of shell game of trading in shady environmental derivatives.

Both the government and the Pacific Carbon Trust have rejected Doyle's conclusions, saying he's not enough of an expert to assess the projects.

But even in a complex area, the way such projects are assessed and funded shouldn't be above oversight and explanation - even to non-experts.

At the very least, Doyle's report signals a need for more robust transparency and oversight - by someone who is not part of the carbon trading system.

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