

## **A change in government in British Columbia has done little to alter the province's environmental path,**

[By Justine Hunter, \*Globe and Mail\*, April 5, 2019](#)

Before the 2017 election that would make him Premier of British Columbia, John Horgan stood with opponents of the proposed Site C dam, a hydroelectric project he described as a multibillion-dollar boondoggle. To acknowledge his support, protest organizers inscribed Mr. Horgan's name on a yellow stake, which was planted within the footprint of the megaproject that the Liberal government of the day was advocating. But on Site C and other major environmental issues, Mr. Horgan has not diverged substantially from the path laid down by the BC Liberals.

The environment was never a big part of the BC NDP's election platform in 2017. The party promised to work on climate action, but made no mention of Site C, or an environmental disaster at the Mount Polley mine. A seismic shift on ecological policies was not part of the New Democrats' promise to voters.

Yet, expectations were high, based on the NDP's record during 16 years on the opposition benches. The New Democrats had opposed Site C, and condemned a proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) project because of the greenhouse gas emissions they would create. They criticized the Liberals for failing to charge the mining company responsible for the Mount Polley disaster. And they committed to extend the model of the Great Bear Rainforest – which permanently protects 85 per cent of old-growth forest in a large swath of BC's central coast.

Now, almost two years after the election, a minority NDP government that is formally supported by the Green Party has approved construction of the Site C dam. The legislature passed a law on April 4 to secure a massive LNG investment [[story here](#)]. The mining industry is welcoming new resources from the province. And some of Canada's oldest trees are heading for auction.

Telling the environmental policies of the NDP and the Liberals apart isn't easy, Green Party MLA Adam Olsen says. "A lot of these decisions are eerily similar."

### **Forestry**

On April 5, the Premier addressed a convention of the Council of Forest Industries, outlining his government's work to chart a new course for a strong, sustainable future for BC's forest sector [[story here](#)]. That includes logging in the last old-growth rain forests on Vancouver Island that are still intact, including some of the biggest Douglas firs in Canada, said Jens Wieting, the Sierra Club of BC's senior forest campaigner.

"We have this consistent pattern of business as usual," he said in an interview. The province's timber-sales agency is putting up for auction this year more than 1,300 hectares of old growth on Vancouver Island – mostly forests that predate Confederation [see chart and map below]. On the Sunshine Coast, cedars estimated to be more than 1,000 years old will be on the block by next year. "To be honest, I am in an utter disbelief about their forestry path," Mr. Wieting said. "In the context of forests, ecosystems and climate change, we are crossing dangerous limits."

In the 2013 election campaign, the NDP promised it would “protect significant ecological areas like wetlands, estuaries and valuable old-growth forests.” But that commitment morphed in 2017 into a promise to use the Great Bear Rainforest model to “sustainably manage.” That plan is still under discussion. This spring, Forests Minister Doug Donaldson said in the legislature that he’s still “drilling down” in talks with environmentalists to determine the importance of saving old-growth forests.

## **Mining**

In February, BC's Mines Minister, Michelle Mungall, announced plans to hire 65 safety and enforcement officials over the next three years, and changes to speed up mines permit approvals. The changes fall short of Auditor-General Carol Bellringer’s recommendations to eliminate the conflict inherent in having compliance and enforcement rest with the ministry that promotes mining development.

The Auditor-General’s recommendations followed the 2014 environmental disaster at the Mount Polley copper mine, when a tailings pond breach spilled about 25 million cubic metres of waste water and tailings into water systems and lakes in central British Columbia.

Wildsight, an environmental organization in the Kootenays, has been working for years on the issue of selenium pollution from five mountaintop-removal coal mines in the Elk Valley owned by Teck Resources Ltd. Lars Sander-Green, an activist with Wildsight, said the expanded enforcement regime in the Ministry of Mines simply reinforces the fox-guarding-the-henhouse situation, paired as it is with more efficient permitting to encourage investment. “They are doubling down on the conflict of interest.”

## **Liquefied natural gas (LNG)**

This week, the federal Environment Commissioner said Canada is not doing enough to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases despite mounting evidence the country is vulnerable to rapid warming. Julie Gelfand’s remarks came one day after a major federal study warned that Canada’s climate is warming at twice the global rate [[story here](#)].

On April 4, legislators – with the exception of BC's three Green MLAs – voted to approve a tax credit for major LNG projects that is tailored to the \$40-billion LNG Canada development – a project that will generate, in Phase One, 3.4 megatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually.

Environment Minister George Heyman said his government will be on the right side of history because it has ensured that the project fits within a new plan called Clean BC that sets out targets to reduce the province’s total GHG output. “There are a lot of people in the North, including many Indigenous nations, who are going to be lifted out of poverty with this project,” he said. “I would never say that’s a reason for unlimited development, but if we can develop within our plan, that was the mandate I was given.”

## **Site C hydroelectric dam**

The yellow stakes honouring people who supported the fight against the megaproject are lined up on Arlene and Ken Boon’s homestead. Their home has been expropriated because it is expected

to slump into the reservoir created by the Site C dam, but they are living on the property until the bulldozers arrive.

Mr. Boon recalls Mr. Horgan speaking passionately against the project as leader of the opposition. “Obviously, we had higher expectations for the NDP,” he said. But after Mr. Horgan announced that the project was too far along to cancel, the surveyor’s stake with his name on it was returned. “The NDP is a complicated party. They got people on both sides of the spectrum on resource extraction and the environment,” Mr. Boon noted. “The so-called brown side of the NDP won the battle of the day.”

Mr. Olsen, the Green Party MLA, echoed that sentiment. From delays protecting species at risk to forestry and the construction of this dam, he said, the New Democrats have established a track record. “With the NDP, on labour and environmental battles, generally the environment loses.”

### **Governing is different**

The BC business community has expressed some anxiety about a growing regulatory burden – a combination of a new environmental assessment regime and changes proposed by the federal government. But mostly, alarm is generally absent over the direction of the NDP government. The Business Council of BC and the province have signed an agreement to advance a competitive, low-carbon industrial strategy. The mining association has praised the changes in its sector. And industry has applauded the government for proceeding with Site C and securing LNG Canada.

Greg D’Avignon, president and chief executive of the business council, said most of the concerns from his members involve what may yet come: “There are a number of environmental files still in flux within the regulatory and legislative processes,” he said. “We are at risk of losing sight of the economy and jobs within these discussions.”

Mr. Heyman, who once led the Sierra Club of BC, said his government has made progress on the environment, including the renewed climate-action plan, new protections for fresh water and a revamped environmental assessment process that comes into effect in the fall and will give communities and First Nations a greater voice in what projects are approved. “There is a lot to praise,” he said. But he noted that the NDP government has been busy on many files – education, health and housing, to name a few – and can only make so many changes at once.

And, while the NDP was free to criticize environmental policy in opposition, governing requires a different, more balanced approach. “I’ve never experienced any interest group being completely satisfied with the actions of any government.”

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### **Chart in *Globe and Mail* article: Loss of productive coastal old-growth temperate rainforest on Vancouver Island**

Productive old-growth rainforest, in hectares:

Original: 2,360,000

Remaining in 1993: 684,000

Remaining in 2018: 469,000

