

Green Scene: Earth Day – Temperatures are rising but governments are snoozing

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, April 28, 2006, page 21)

[Title in Tri-City News: Temperatures rising but gov't is snoozing]

Last week on April 22, we celebrated the 36th annual Earth Day since the concept was created in 1970. Of course, every day should be an Earth Day but, more than ever, we need to be mindful that the planet on which we live is small and straining to support the 6 billion people who rely upon its resources.

Back in the seventies, we needed an Earth Day because, with growing affluence and issues such as peace, race and gender equality seemingly achieved, people began to notice that our prosperity had been purchased, in part, through polluting the environment. It's thought that a fire on June 22, 1969 had much to do with the impetus to create Earth Day. That was when the Cuyahoga River in Ohio burned because of all the oil and chemical pollutants dumped into it.

Today, we face a threat that only a few scientists had considered in the 1970s – global warming. In recent years, scientific journals have been replete with many studies of climate change. The evidence has become unequivocal with only a few crackpots and right wing organizations remaining in a state of denial. By burning so many fossil fuels, we are altering the climate of the earth...and it will get worse unless we change our ways. Author and biologist, Tim Flannery, in his latest and most eloquent book, aptly calls us "The Weather Makers". As our planet overheats, weather cycles will change and create havoc for many species, including ourselves. For example, if major agricultural areas around the world become stricken with drought, millions of people could starve. Worldwide, we hold less than 80 days worth of consumption in grain reserves; this is down considerably from the 1980s when supplies peaked at 120 days worth. Regardless, it's not much of a safety margin.

I think most people understand the problems we face with global warming and are willing to do something about it. Certainly, there are several actions we can take as individuals. The previous federal government developed the "One Tonne Challenge" program that provides information to help us reduce our personal greenhouse gas production (see www.climatechange.gc.ca if you need a few hints). But individual actions can only go so far. We also need government to show leadership by undertaking initiatives such as stricter emission standards for vehicles, more public transit options and support for greenhouse gas-free energy sources.

A recent survey showed that more than eight in ten Canadians believe governments should enact stricter laws and regulations to support a more sustainable economy. Instead, we seem to have government leaders who appear to be quite out of touch with what the public wants. Federally, we have a new government which plans to axe some aspects of the climate change program but continues to subsidize fossil fuel generation and the development of the tar sands in Alberta. Provincially, we have a government that wants to build more highways and bridges for gas-guzzling cars, seeks to lift the moratorium on offshore oil exploration and drilling and promotes urban sprawl by allowing more

agricultural lands to be removed from the Agricultural Land Reserve. Even BC Hydro is apparently considering generating electricity through the burning of coal. There appears to be an appalling lack of understanding and vision amongst many of our elected officials.

Taking action to prevent global warming is simply taking care of the future and ensuring that the generations who come after us will have full and fruitful lives as we do today. I have great faith in human ingenuity and the ability of people to adapt and solve problems. When the Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969, it was hardly the first time the River had caught fire but it was the last. By 1972, the USA had a Clean Water Act and, while the sediments in this River still have a toxic legacy of PCBs and heavy metals, its banks are now more likely to be lined with trees than industrial factories and the fish have reappeared. We can deal with global warming, too, but government action is required.