

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

June 9, 2003

Saskatchewan's Future. Agriculture or Energy?

For many years Saskatchewan has been referred to as "the gap" - the space between Manitoba and Alberta. This misconception is perpetuated by the flat open spaces bordering our major highways. This makes it difficult to visualize Saskatchewan as a world leader in the production of mineral commodities. In addition to potash and uranium, gold, copper, coal, salt, and about a dozen other minerals are found in the province

The Saskatchewan Mining Association recently held its annual convention in Saskatoon and its major theme was the economic impact and significance of the mining industry in the province. Did you know, for example, that mining constitutes about fifteen percent to the total provincial economy, but utilizes only 0.1% of the available land area? (That represents a space about the size of the city of Saskatoon.) And, did you know that Canada is number one in the world in the production of only two mineral commodities – uranium and potash – both from Saskatchewan. With the recent promising exploration results, we could soon see a few diamond mines here as well.

One very important presentation was on uranium. It may come as a surprise to many that 16% percent of the world's electricity is produced from uranium, one-third of which comes from Saskatchewan. In many countries around the world nuclear energy is considered to be a safe and environmentally friendly source of power. France, it was revealed, produces about 80% of its electrical needs from nuclear power. In the United States, about one hundred nuclear reactors currently produce 20% of the countries electricity. Today, one in ten U.S. homes is powered by uranium purchased from Cameco, a Saskatchewan-based company. Obviously, many people live adjacent to nuclear facilities without concern for their safety.

While Saskatchewan contributes significantly to the generation of electricity around the world, we fail to produce a single kilowatt of electrical power from our own natural resource. Does this not seem a little unusual given that we live next door to the world's biggest energy consumer, and a major world energy shortage looms ahead?

It has been reported that the U.S. will need to double its sources of energy supplies in the next twenty years. Nuclear generated electricity is the fastest growing source of electrical production in the U.S. – without a single new power plant being constructed (this has all been achieved through upgrades and operating efficiencies).

This should give rise to private sector investment in building a few reactors in this province. In addition to providing power for export, nuclear energy will also help us to meet our own demand for a clean source of electricity. Remember the Kyoto Accord?

In addition, should we not be considering the wealth creation potential of the other elements in the nuclear fuel cycle. Take returning the spent fuel to safe underground storage in a remote area, for example. Is that not where it originated in the first place?

While no politician from any party is anxious to acknowledge that this province has a 15 billion dollar debt, billions more in unfunded pension liabilities, and pays 760 million dollars annually in interest, this fact can no longer be ignored. It has been suggested that the construction of a nuclear power generation plant and a facility for the underground storage of spent fuel would eliminate the provincial debt in less than ten years. We have the technology. We have the workforce. We may need the capital, but that will come. There is no doubt that nuclear energy has tremendous potential for economic growth and wealth creation, but we must move quickly to make it happen. It's time to open the public debate.

There is more to come.

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Ken Dillen sits on the Board of Directors of the Prairie Centre Policy Institute. "Where Do We Go From Here?" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.