Opinion: B.C. clean fuel regulation works
Let's keep it clean, clear cut and strong

BY MICHAEL WOLINETZ AND JONN AXSEN, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN  SEPTEMBER 24, 2014

Imagine a policy that cuts greenhouse gas pollution from cars, trucks, boats and trains without requiring any real change in how we get around.

Sound too good to be true? It isn't. A policy such as this is already in place in British Columbia.

But sadly, this policy is under threat. It is under review and some fuel providers want the B.C. government to weaken it. We ask that the government stick to its guns. The vast majority of British Columbians agree with us.

We are talking about B.C.'s renewable & low-carbon fuel requirements regulation. It's a long name, so we'll call it what it is: a clean-fuel regulation. Because of this policy, you are probably already using some cleaner, renewable fuels in your car or truck, and probably don't even know it.

As experts in climate policy, energy systems, and energy markets, we have collectively spent many years analyzing different policies around the world. B.C.'s clean fuel regulation is a good one, but for its magic to work, the B.C. government needs to keep the policy strong.

The clean-fuel regulation started in 2010 with a requirement to increase the use of renewable fuels. Just like the Californian policy it was modelled after, the clean-fuel regulation requires a reduction in the life cycle greenhouse gas intensity of transportation fuels used in B.C. That means that fuel providers must reduce the greenhouse gases emitted during fuel production, refining, transportation and consumption. The result: B.C.'s transportation fuels get cleaner every year.

So why haven't you heard of this policy? It's not just because of the complicated name. The policy doesn't have much effect on how or when you drive. Fuel providers have mostly been complying with the policy by adding biofuel to gasoline and diesel. This blended fuel is sold and used just like regular gasoline or diesel: same drivers, same cars, less emissions.

This policy is working. It reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 900,000 tonnes in 2012, one quarter of...
the net reduction in B.C.’s annual emissions since 2007. That’s equivalent to the greenhouse gas pollution produced by all personal vehicles in the city of Vancouver each year. B.C.’s clean-fuel regulation is on track to cut even more emissions. As we explain in our recent summary of the policy (www.naviusresearch.com/data/pages/cleanfuel.php), the reduced emissions could more than triple by 2020.

If you like the idea of the clean-fuel regulation, you are not alone. We surveyed a representative sample of 475 British Columbian residents. Almost nobody had heard of this policy. But once we explained it, 90 per cent of respondents supported it.

But maybe you are concerned about biofuels? That’s fair: It would be counterproductive to cut down tropical forests or churn carbon-rich soils to grow more biofuels. But the beauty of B.C.’s clean-fuel regulation is that it traces each fuel to the source. Dirty biofuels don’t receive credit; fuel providers must select fuels that are more environmentally friendly than gasoline or diesel. Further, the policy encourages innovation among all low-carbon fuels. In addition to conventional biofuels, the requirement can be met by using other fuels such as low-carbon electricity, advanced biofuels, hydrogen or renewable natural gas. The math can be tricky, but this policy encourages government and industry to account for the entire fuel supply chain so we can make smart decisions about our fuel use.

Our first recommendation is B.C. government stick to its 2020 requirements. Some fuel providers claim that the policy is too challenging. That’s not uncommon. There is industry resistance to almost every climate policy. Change can be difficult, but a policy that stimulates change and innovation is a policy that is working.

Second, the B.C. government should commit to a stronger clean-fuel requirement for 2025 and 2030, co-ordinating this effort among all regions with clean fuel standards, such as California. Industry needs consistent signals about what is expected of it in the long-term. A firm policy with a long time horizon will allow industry to confidently channel innovation and investment into the cleaner fuels we need.

B.C.’s clean-fuel regulation is probably one of the best greenhouse gas emissions policies you have never heard of. Our fuel is already becoming cleaner, but we need to do much more to meet our provincial and national climate goals. B.C. must maintain and strengthen the clean-fuel regulation, committing to a cleaner, safer future for ourselves and our children.

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