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Frequently Asked Environmental Law Questions

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Q:

I often see and hear “sustainable development” mentioned as an important element in how we plan for our society's future. But I don’t really understand what sustainable development is all about. What does sustainable development really mean?

A:

Part of the confusion surrounding sustainable development arises because sustainable development does not have a universal definition. As a consequence, it can have many different meanings. Many people understand that sustainable development has something to do with environmental matters, and some also make a link with economic matters and resource conservation.

The term “sustainable development” was originally created by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, in 1987. The Brundtland Commission was established by the United Nations as an independent body to examine the world's environmental and development problems and propose solutions. *Our Common Future*, the Commission's report, defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It is this definition, and variations of it that are most commonly found in legislation, policy and other documents dealing with sustainable development.

There are two elements that are common to most definitions of sustainable development. The first is equity between the current and future generations in relation to resource use. It is generally understood to mean that resource use should be managed in a manner that will ensure continued availability of those resources for future generations. The second is integrated decision making that takes a number of factors, including economic and environmental, into account. This focuses on considering all consequences of decisions to be made and actions to be taken.

The Alberta government took steps in the late 1980s and early 1990s to develop an Alberta vision of sustainable development by creating the Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy. The Round Table was a multi-stakeholder body appointed by the province to advise it on how to implement and achieve sustainable development.

The Alberta Round Table considered sustainable development matters in detail over the course of about three years. In 1991, it issued a report setting out its vision for Alberta when sustainable development is achieved. The second Round Table report, issued in 1993, made detailed recommendations for changes to achieve sustainable development and set out a list of indicators or criteria to guide actions and measure progress towards its vision of sustainable development. Generally, the Round Table's work focused on integration of environmental and economic factors in both public and private decision making and actions. The Alberta Round Table was phased out in the mid-1990s as part of broad provincial government cost-cutting and deregulation measures.

Since that time, the Alberta government has taken some steps to incorporate sustainable development concepts into policy and legislation, but these steps do not wholly reflect the views of the Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy. The concept of sustainable development, patterned on the Brundtland Commission's definition, has been incorporated in various pieces of environmental legislation enacted in Alberta in the 1990s, including the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* and the *Water Act*. These Acts have generally included sustainable development as a purpose of the legislation or a governing principle of a regulatory process.

However, the Alberta government has not incorporated similar definitions and concepts into economic development or decision-making legislation. While the tendency of the provincial government has been to either class sustainable development as a purely environmental concept or see the achievement of sustainable development as a balance between the environment and the economy as competing interests, it has begun to take more positive steps towards sustainable development initiatives.¹ Provincial agencies are beginning to consider proposed industrial developments with a view to the cumulative effects of development within the region to be affected. Recent provincial policy documents also indicate an intention to develop a

sustainable approach to resource and environmental management. The real test will be the extent to which the Alberta government moves from dealing with sustainable development solely in the environmental context and ultimately incorporates it as a key concept in economic development policy and legislation.

¹ For example, the Department of Alberta Sustainable Resource Development was created in March 2001 “to ensure all Albertans benefit from a balanced approach to renewable resource development.” (<http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/index.html>)



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Environmental Law Centre

The Environmental Law Centre (Alberta) Society is a non-profit charitable organization operating in Alberta since 1982. The Society believes in making the law work to protect the environment and in support of this objective, provides services in environmental law education and assistance, environmental law reform, and environmental law research. The Society operates the Environmental Law Centre that is staffed by four full-time lawyers.

Funding is provided to the Society in part by the Alberta Law Foundation and through the generous support of the public. The Centre also accepts private and government research contracts for work relevant to and consistent with the Society's objectives.



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The information provided is current to September 30, 2000. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and timeliness of the information, the answer, of necessity, is of a general nature. The Environmental Law Centre encourages individuals to seek specific advice on matters of concern and not to rely solely on the information in this publication.

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For further information, pursue the following:

Library Resources:

- ALBERTA: WORKING FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: REPORT OF THE ALBERTA ROUND TABLE ON ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY / Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy. -- Edmonton: Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy, 1991.
- BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: Putting Principles into Practice / Cormick, Gerald ... [et al.] -- Ottawa: National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) c1996.
- DEVELOPING INDICATORS OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY: A Focus on the Canadian Experience / Maclaren, Virginia W. / State of the Environment Directorate, Environment Canada; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; Intergovernmental Committee on Urban and Regional Research. -- Toronto: ICURR Press, 1996.
- OUR COMMON FUTURE: THE WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT / World Commission on Environment and Development. -- Oxford: Oxford University Press, c1987.
- PUTTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO WORK: IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH LAW AND POLICY / Swanson, Elizabeth. -- Edmonton: Environmental Law Centre, c1994.
- STEPS TO REALIZING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: REPORT OF THE ALBERTA ROUND TABLE ON ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY: MAY 1993 / Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy. -- Edmonton: Alberta Round Table on Environment and Economy, 1993.
- SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPTS / Maser, Chris. Delray Beach, Fla.: St. Lucie Press, c1997.

Websites:

- <http://www.nrtee-trnee.ca/> Website of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. The Round Table is an independent advisory body established to explain and promote sustainable development. The site contains publications, information on programs, and a list of upcoming events.
- <http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/> Website of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada within which the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development operates. "The role of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development is to assist parliamentarians in their oversight of the federal government's efforts to protect the environment and foster sustainable development, by providing them with objective, independent analysis and recommendations." The site contains a useful database of international environmental agreements that Canada is a party to. Useful information on the agreement including dates signed, ratified, and amended are provided as is a statement of the commitments made and where possible, a link to the text of the agreement.
- <http://www.sdgateway.net/> This site is hosted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development for the Sustainable Development Communications Network, a group of non-governmental organizations using the Internet to pursue sustainable development. The site provides links to over 1200 documents on sustainable development topics as well as a calendar of events and links to news sites and other sources for further information.

- <http://www.schoolnet.ca/pri-prp/sustainability/sustainability-e.htm> This is a Government of Canada website that provides information on the Sustainability Project that many government departments are participating in. The Project is to enhance the government's ability to implement sustainable development through conducting and distributing policy research in key areas of concern and through collaborating with partners inside and outside of government.
- <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/sustcalg/index.html> The website of an organization formed in 1996 to promote, encourage and support community level actions and initiatives that will move Calgary toward a sustainable future. The site will serve as a useful source of information for what can be done on the local level.
- <http://www.uml.edu/centers/LCSP/index.html> Website of the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, an organization that develops, studies, and promotes environmentally sound systems of production, healthy work environments, and economically viable work organizations. The site includes a list of projects the Center is involved with or has completed.
- <http://www.iclei.org/la21/onestop.htm> The website of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), an international environmental agency for local governments. "Its mission is to build and serve a worldwide movement of local governments to achieve tangible improvements in global environmental and sustainable development conditions through cumulative local actions." Caution: some of their materials are for members only.

Contacts:

- Legislation referred to is available from
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