

Sask. premier pushes clean-energy in U.S.

BY SHELDON ALBERTS, WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MARCH 6, 2009



Premier Brad Wall also discussed Saskatchewan's interest in developing small nuclear reactor technology as a way to replace the burning of natural gas in the production of oilsands oil.

Photograph by: Gord Waldner, Star Phoenix

WASHINGTON — Whenever he's selling Saskatchewan to an unfamiliar American audience, Premier Brad Wall starts with the most basic geography lesson.

First, location: Saskatchewan is that big "trapezoid" province located just north of Montana, and spilling over a corner of North Dakota.

Then, with a proud "bet you didn't know" tone, Wall explains how Saskatchewan sells more oil each year to the United States than Kuwait, produced 23 per cent of the world's uranium last year, and has one-third of the world's potash reserves.

"I have one of the best jobs on the continent. I get to tell the story that is Saskatchewan, everywhere I go," Wall said Friday, at the end of a two-day visit to the U.S. capital. "I promote my province every chance I get."

Never mind that Wall's host at a Friday luncheon struggled just to pronounce Saskatchewan (emphasizing consonants in all the wrong places), the first-term premier believes his province's profile in Washington is about to grow substantially, as U.S. President Barack Obama begins a concerted push to develop clean-energy sources and technology.

Obama's economic stimulus package sets aside \$3.4 billion U.S., specifically for developing "carbon-capture and sequestration" technology. Wall made the rounds on Capitol Hill this week, asking that

\$100 million U.S. be set aside for a Montana-Saskatchewan project to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from one of the province's coal-fired electrical plants.

Saskatchewan has committed \$60 million Cdn to the project, which would be the first large-scale carbon-capture operation in North America. It would take carbon dioxide produced in Saskatchewan and ship it by pipeline to Montana, where it would be stored deep underground.

Saskatchewan has also committed to a \$1.4-billion Cdn refit of one of its coal-fired electrical plants to add carbon-capture equipment.

Obama made known his interest in Saskatchewan's carbon-capture technology during his visit last month to Canada, when he and Prime Minister Stephen Harper touted the success of an existing research project in Weyburn, Sask.

That facility stores greenhouse gas produced from a North Dakota gasification plant.

Obama and Harper said carbon-sequestration technology holds "enormous potential" for reducing the carbon imprint of coal.

"Part of the reason we are here is to get the message out that sustainable energy development is as much of a priority in Saskatchewan and Canada as it is in the United States. Witness the investment we're prepared to put into it," Wall said in an interview with Canwest News Service.

"With respect to clean-coal or carbon-capture technology . . . I don't think you'll find another jurisdiction that's prepared to make the investment that we have signalled we are going to make."

To help draw attention to Saskatchewan's efforts on clean-energy technology, Wall is drawing inspiration from Alberta which, in 2005, set up its own political and trade office in Washington to cultivate ties with U.S. lawmakers.

Wall spent part of his trip to Washington scouting D.C. lobby firms, with the intention of hiring one to protect the province's interests on Capitol Hill.

"We hope to get a firm that's not just got some ability to open some political doors. We need to continue to open financial doors and attract capital to the province," he said.

"They would be boots on the ground in the Capitol."

During meetings with several prominent U.S. lawmakers — including senators Joe Lieberman and Lindsey Graham — Wall also discussed Saskatchewan's interest in developing small nuclear reactor technology as a way to replace the burning of natural gas in the production of oilsands oil.

"There are challenges and risk to these technologies, but we will cause ourselves innumerable more problems if our default position is to do nothing," Wall said.

Of course, certain risks come with having a higher profile in Washington — especially regarding energy and the environment.

Alberta had early success promoting itself as a safe and secure source of foreign oil, but is now struggling to combat anti-oilsands sentiment among U.S. lawmakers under pressure from the environmental lobby.

"I think Alberta has done a great job of getting their story out there," says Wall. "There's still challenges around oilsands. But they will successfully deal with it, because they have worked hard to develop a profile here."

Saskatchewan, which has its own untapped oilsands reserves, is now coming under greater scrutiny from environmentalists, even as it touts itself as an emerging leader in green technology.

Susan Casey-Lefkowitz, director of the Canada project at the Natural Resources Defence Council, believes that developing carbon-capture technology is potentially a "good thing when it comes to cleaning up existing coal plants."

But she says the governments of Saskatchewan, Alberta and Canada are also "pushing carbon capture and sequestration as some sort of (environmental) silver bullet for the tarsands," even though the technology is unproven.

Saskatchewan is "looking at the tarsands oil deposits as the big opportunity of the future, and that is not a clean or green energy opportunity for the future," Casey-Lefkowitz said in an interview.

Wall acknowledges "everyone would have liked to have anticipated" the environmental backlash over the oilsands sooner.

"We should be striving to always do a better job, environmentally," he said. "That's a positive message, especially when you combine it with the other important message about our energy, which is, it's conflict-free, and it's from a friend."

But he disputes any notion that Saskatchewan isn't taking the lead on environmentally-sustainable energy.

"We're not just talking about it. We're doing something," he says.

"I think Americans need to know we're serious about it, and we're doing something now and we're going to reduce that (carbon) footprint."

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service