

## *Comments to the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development on the Draft Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, 2013–16*

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*Dave Sawyer, VP, Energy and Partnerships*

*June 2013*

1. Mr. Chair, members of the committee, ladies and gentleman, it is my pleasure to be here today to reflect on the draft 2013-16 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS).
2. Our CEO, Scott Vaughan, extends his regrets for being unable to be here today. He is working in China with senior decision-makers to help frame new and important programs to strengthen sustainable development (SD).
3. The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has been facilitating the transition to development futures that are more sustainable for over 20 years. We have been working actively at home and abroad as a non-partisan SD thought leader, building partnerships and engaging policy-makers in government, business and civil society.
4. Currently, we are working in 45 countries, and have advised 15 governments globally on the development of their SDSs. IISD's view on the federal SDS is informed by our unique position as a global SD leader based in Canada, building on our global experience with SD research, policy and practice.
5. While IISD has witnessed the rise of SD as a unifying concept, we have also witnessed its calcification under the environment pillar alone, where SD now equals environment. This has raised the risk that SD as a unifying frame is passé, with limited ability to help achieve national development aspirations.
6. But a renewed shift in the SD landscape has emerged. There is increasing recognition that environmental, economic and social linkages need more attention in policy development. In Canada, we are seeing a trend towards revealing the economic value of ecosystem goods and services that is strengthening on-the-ground efforts to manage wetlands, grasslands and watersheds for farming communities and conservationists alike.
7. In a sense, we have come full circle, where SD as practiced is better realigning with SD as originally conceived by the Brundtland Commission over 25 years ago.
8. The federal government is in good company with the 100 or so countries that have published national SDSs globally. SDSs are clearly the vehicle of choice for how governments around the world translate SD policy into practice.
9. In 2012 IISD reviewed 32 of these 100 or so global SDS strategies to look for lessons learned and to assess the global state-of-play. Our findings are informative, influencing IISD's view on Canada's draft federal SDS that we share with you here today.
10. While we found that success hinges on many things, two key elements are worth noting within the context of the draft federal SDS.
11. **First, an "ideal" SDS emphasizes good governance and enables implementation.** SDSs are both governance reform agendas and a "North Star" to signal expectations both within and outside government. Successful SDSs build on elements of good governance, including transparency, accountability, ongoing evaluation and performance reporting. SDSs commit resources to the SDS agenda in an open and transparent manner, signaling priorities, while implementation road maps make clear the action that is to come.
12. **Second, success hinges on more horizontal integration and a dynamic forward-looking view.** There is no doubt that ineffective integration between institutions and a myopic focus on environment alone impedes SDS success. Integration needs to move beyond the environmental pillar, truly enabling horizontal implementation to broaden the SD constituency both within and outside government. The role of central agencies is key to poking and prodding for more horizontal coordination and achieving results. Related is a longer-term view that is more forward-looking and strategic, seeing beyond short-term departmental plans and priorities, and addressing uncertainties and risks that impede success.

13. With these general observations on global SDS success noted, we can now turn to some specific observations on the draft federal SDS. We have six specific recommendations:

- a. **The federal SDS is more a clearinghouse for environment programs rather than an SDS.** There is a need to rethink the singular pillar presented in the SDS and broaden the focus to more closely align with the balanced view of SD. Housing the draft SDS in Environment Canada reinforces the stereotype and indeed implementation risk that SD is just an environment issue.
- b. **As an environmental clearinghouse, the federal SDS is neither strategic nor a SD policy document.** Our observation is that the draft SDS at best provides a snapshot in time, with no forward-looking strategic view or roadmap for success. Importantly, the SDS does not identify uncertainties and risks that could impede long-term success. A longer-term and more integrated implementation view would strengthen the SDS.
- c. **Communicate SD linkages more clearly.** Priority areas in the draft SDS have large economic and social consequences. We know, for example, that climate long ago moved from an environmental to an economic issue. Indeed, the head of the International Monetary Fund at Davos this year said that climate is the biggest economic challenge of the 21st century.

This is certainly the case in Canada, where the government's sector-based greenhouse gas regulations will likely impose costs in the order of CAD\$30 billion on Canada's economy and on Canadian consumers between now and 2030. We need SD strategies to spell out these economic, environmental and social linkages to better articulate the trade-offs of federal policy.

- d. **The federal SDS could be more transparent.** The deluge of priority indicators and implementation strategies will make it hard for parliamentarians and Canadians to identify priorities and track results. Priority actions need to be simplified under five or six major actions for each theme, inducing more clearly articulated roadmaps for implementation and associated financial disbursements. Improved performance reporting could be strengthened for a few priority areas.
- e. **Improve financial reporting.** In the draft federal SDS, we are unable to identify financing for the four thematic areas, their indicators and implementation strategies. We therefore assume that parliamentarians and Canadians would have the same challenge. Adding more transparent budget information would signal priorities and support transparency to parliamentarians and the public.
- f. **Be more realistic.** Often in strategy documents we find a wide gap between the aspirations of government and the actions to support implementation. This draft SDS is no different, with almost a cheerleader-like accounting of major thematic priorities supported by page upon page of implementation strategies. But where are the outcomes? A more open and honest alignment of what can be achieved by when would better align expectations.

14. For these reasons, we think some additional effort is required to make the draft federal SDS more transparent, more strategic and a more balanced SD policy document.

15. Thank you. I would be happy to answer your questions and explore these issues further.

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