



Fall 2019

Reports of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the Parliament of Canada

The Commissioner's Perspective



Office of the
Auditor General
of Canada

Bureau du
vérificateur général
du Canada



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To the Honourable Speakers of the House of Commons and the Senate:

On behalf of the Interim Auditor General of Canada, I have the honour to transmit herewith these fall 2019 reports, which are to be laid before the House and the Senate, in accordance with subsection 23(5) of the *Auditor General Act*.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andrew Hayes". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "H" and a long, trailing "s".

Andrew Hayes
Interim Commissioner of the Environment
and Sustainable Development

OTTAWA, December 2019

The Commissioner's Perspective



Andrew Hayes
Interim Commissioner of the
Environment and Sustainable
Development

A lack of coordination between approaches to sustainable development could impede Canada's progress

As I step into the role of Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development until former Commissioner Julie Gelfand is officially replaced, I am concerned by the lack of coordination between various tools intended to move sustainable development forward in Canada. Layering disconnected strategies on more strategies is confusing for government officials trying to make a difference and for Canadians trying to understand the country's progress toward meeting sustainable development commitments.

This lack of coordination is a persistent problem, both across and within federal organizations. Specifically, Environment and Climate Change Canada leads the implementation of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, while Employment and Social Development Canada leads federal and national implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue I see is that both approaches aim to achieve the same objective and yet have separate strategies, which remain largely uncoordinated and disconnected.

In June 2019, Employment and Social Development Canada released its interim Towards Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy and started to develop a Canadian indicator framework to measure progress toward meeting the SDGs. Also in June 2019, Environment and Climate Change Canada released its new Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (2019 to 2022), which includes another set of indicators, along with commitments and targets, designed to lead the federal government toward sustainable development.

In other countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, a single strategy is aimed at implementing sustainable development. In other words, the sustainable development strategy is the approach for implementing the SDGs. Without a coordinated approach in Canada, we risk duplicating work, creating confusion, and ultimately, impeding progress toward sustainable development and not achieving the SDGs.

The review work that we completed this past year once again highlighted a lack of coordination, along with other issues that we have previously brought to the attention of Parliament—in some cases, repeatedly. Fundamental weaknesses persist in the design of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and departments' sustainable development strategies. These weaknesses make those sustainable development tools difficult to understand and significantly reduce their value and effectiveness. Departments should be working to correct them. Former Auditor General Michael Ferguson believed that parliamentary committees have a crucial role to play in challenging departments to use our audit reports to make sure that change takes place.

The new *Federal Sustainable Development Act* received royal assent in February 2019. When it comes into force, more than 90 organizations will be required to prepare sustainable development plans that connect to the federal strategy. This is a positive step, as only 27 organizations were required to do so previously.

Now is the time for the government to ensure that there is a single, well-designed, and coordinated strategy for sustainable development that covers all of the organizations and all of the sustainable development goals, targets, and implementation strategies. Coordination and accurate reporting are also essential to ensure that Parliament can hold the government to account on meeting its sustainable development commitments.

A word of thanks to Julie Gelfand

Julie Gelfand was appointed as Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development in 2014. With the support of the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), she produced audits on a variety of subjects of national importance.

In 2018, she reported to Parliament on the results of a collaborative climate change project, which pulled in audit work from the audit offices of almost all of the provinces and territories, as well as the OAG. This collaborative work was remarkable, because it provided an overview of the extent to which governments across Canada were meeting their promises to Canadians to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change.

In addition to her audits, she raised awareness both within the OAG and internationally of the SDGs. We are working to integrate the goals and the underlying principles into all of our activities and audits. Audit offices around the world are also weaving the SDGs into their work, and her commitment and efforts helped make the OAG a leader in this area.

On a personal note, I had the pleasure to lead audits for her. Her approach was driven by enthusiasm, dedication, and an unwavering focus on the interests of Canadians. The OAG is grateful to her for her contributions to these priorities, and we wish her the best in her new endeavours. As Interim Commissioner, I will strive to build on her strong foundation by integrating the SDGs into our audits.

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