

## Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

In 2006, OPSEU Convention passed “Greening OPSEU,” an ambitious plan to help the union do more to protect our natural environment. Of the plan’s many goals, none is more important than tackling the most pressing environmental issue of the day: global warming. Doing our part to reduce the effects of global warming begins with setting targets.

The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that to avoid the worst effects of global warming we must keep average global temperatures at 2 degrees Celsius or less above pre-industrial levels. To do so, the UCS says, industrialized nations must cut their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 80 per cent by 2050.

In Ontario, the McGuinty government’s targets, if achieved, will reduce greenhouse gases as follows:

- six per cent below 1990 levels by 2014;
- 15 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020;
- 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

These targets put Ontario near the head of the pack among North American jurisdictions over the long term. Manitoba, the Canadian leader, aims to be 18 per cent below 1990 levels by 2010.

Federally, the response to climate change from the Harper government has been weaker. The Harper plan would reduce emissions by 20 per cent below 2006 levels by 2020 and by 60-70 per cent below 2006 levels by 2050.<sup>1</sup>

OPSEU faces a number of issues when setting a GHG reduction target:

**1. Deciding on a base year.** While the Kyoto Protocol set 1990 as the base year for emission reduction targets, we do not have accurate data about our energy consumption in 1990. A better choice might be 2006. That is a year for which data are readily available, and it is the year Convention launched Greening OPSEU.

**2. Measurement.** Keeping track of all our consumption of electricity, natural gas, water (which is treated and pumped by electricity), gasoline (gas cards and kilometre charges), plus estimating fuel consumption related to flights, train trips, and bus trips, is no small job. It will require a commitment to building and maintaining a solid database.

**3. Growth of the union.** OPSEU is still growing. One possible response to this would be to set our GHG targets based on member numbers. This would be a version of what are called “intensity” targets. By reaching these targets, we would be reducing our energy use per capita even if our overall energy consumption might be rising in terms. The problem with this is that the negative effects of global warming relate to *total* carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, not amounts relative to the number of people using energy.

**4. Technological change.** It is likely that new technology will play a significant role in reducing GHG emissions for society as a whole. Indeed, 20 per cent of the McGuinty government’s plan is based on “research and innovation,” i.e., ideas that haven’t been thought of or developed yet. Other technologies that exist now, such as web conferencing, are likely to become better and more affordable as time passes.

**5. External factors beyond our control.**

- Coal-fired electricity generation produces about one-eighth of Ontario’s greenhouse gas emissions. The McGuinty government plans to phase out these plants means that the electricity we use will create fewer GHG emissions even if our electricity consumption remains at the same level.
- Changes to energy prices, government subsidies, taxes, and laws governing emissions may also influence OPSEU’s ability to meet targets. Of course, any change that occurs is likely to make conservation cheaper, not more expensive. That increases our financial incentive to conserve.
- Changes to public transit. Improved public transit would reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the whole province, including OPSEU.

**6. What’s needed.** The Union of Concerned Scientists’ estimate that industrialized nations need to reduce GHG emissions by 80 per cent by 2050 (from 1990 levels) is in the ballpark of figures used by progressive organizations concerned about global warming. It is also important to note that what happens to the planet depends on total, not annual, emissions. This means that the faster reductions happen, the better.

**7. What’s realistic.** OPSEU would not be able to cut 80 per cent of greenhouse gas production in one year without shutting down operations altogether. There’s no point setting a target that we have no hope of achieving.

## **Enabling motion**

WHEREAS Convention 2006 committed our union to “Greening OPSEU,” a plan to improve our union’s environmental performance in a wide range of areas;

AND WHEREAS global warming is the most pressing environmental issue facing life on Earth today;

AND WHEREAS global warming is driven by combustion of fossil fuels for electricity generation, heating, and travel;

AND WHEREAS energy use consumes a significant part of the OPSEU budget and is wholly responsible for our greenhouse gas emissions;

AND WHEREAS there are many benefits to reducing energy use, including environmental, economic, and public relations benefits;

AND WHEREAS adopting GHG emission-reduction targets can open up new avenues of communication and co-operation with other organizations and with government at all levels;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that OPSEU commit itself to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases from the union’s operations based on the following targets:

- A 12 per cent reduction from 2006 levels by 2014 (2 per cent per year 2008-2014);
- A 30 per cent reduction from 2006 levels by 2020 (3.0 per cent per year 2014-2020);
- A 55 per cent reduction from 2006 levels by 2030; (2.5 per cent per year 2020-2030); and
- An 80 per cent reduction from 2006 levels by 2040 (2.5 per cent per year 2030-2040).

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that, henceforth, all operational decisions of the union be made with due consideration for these targets.

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the First Vice-President/Treasurer provide a report to Convention each year on progress towards these targets.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Since emission levels were much lower in 1990 than in 2006, using 1990 as the base year is much tougher than using 2006. Canada's emissions rose by more than 25 per cent from 1990 to 2005. This brought Canada's emissions to 32.7 per cent above the Kyoto Protocol target (1990 minus 6 per cent).