

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-ottawas-promised-a-climate-change-adaptation-strategy-in-2022-what/>

Ottawa has promised a climate-change adaptation strategy in 2022. What will it take to get the balance right?

As floods, fires and extreme heat get worse and more frequent, the clock is ticking for Canada to get ready for future emergencies. Here's what it has to do

ADAM RADWANSKI

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

FOR SUBSCRIBERS



ILLUSTRATION BY THE GLOBE AND MAIL (PHOTOS: REUTERS, CP)

If 2021 was the year when floods and wildfires and record-smashing heat waves made the disastrous effects of climate change impossible for Canadians to ignore, 2022 is

supposed to be when this country gets serious about building resilience to even worse consequences yet to come.

The federal government has promised that by the end of this year, it will release Canada's first ever National Adaptation Strategy. More than just Ottawa cobbling together a plan, its development – which began only recently – is supposed to bring together provinces, communities, the private sector and other partners in common purpose.

The effort should have started sooner, with Canada lagging many other countries in getting down to this sort of work, despite temperatures warming here at about double the global rate. Trying to mitigate climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions has been given priority over adapting to effects of climate change that it's already too late to prevent, despite the need for both having been glaring for a while.

Now, the government faces a difficult balancing act. Ottawa is trying to produce a comprehensive long-term road map for transforming everything from emergency services, to infrastructure, to supply chains, so Canada can become more resilient as temperatures keep rising in the decades ahead. But the strategy also needs to meet the urgency of the moment, with specific plans to address immediate risks.

“I think that's really the purpose of this exercise,” Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault said, stressing that the government won't wait for the strategy's completion before making short-term investments for imminent needs, such as enhanced wildfire protection and flood management. “How do we chew gum and walk and maybe text at the same time?”



Steven Guilbeault is the federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change. ALASTAIR GRANT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

If it all comes together, the strategy will produce adaptation targets that help galvanize action and bring some measure of accountability, as emissions-reduction targets do for mitigation. It will enable better rationalization of resources in a geographically diverse country that faces virtually every type of climate risk imaginable. And it will establish new structures that allow different levels of government and outside interests to work consistently and collaboratively in tackling those risks, in ways they haven't to date.

It might even give Canada a chance to lead, in some regards, despite being slow out of the gate. There is plenty of room for fresh thinking on how to rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic in a more resilient way.

That includes finding ways to reduce rather than exacerbate social inequalities as vulnerable populations face some of the worst climate risks, exploring ways to leverage public funds for private investment in adaptation and adopting ambitious nature-based solutions.

But it's a tremendously complex undertaking in a single year. Based on interviews with some of the people centrally involved in process, they are still in the early stages of grappling with fundamental questions about what this sort of strategy even looks like.

And while there are some intriguing potential answers emerging, it will require greater leadership than Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals have yet shown to pull together the sort of vision they have promised.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau looks at maps of Abbotsford, B.C., on a November visit to the flooded city. An 'atmospheric river' brought record-breaking rainfall to the B.C. Interior and Lower Mainland, heightening alarm about the extreme weather that climate change will bring to Canada.
JONATHAN HAYWARD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The first stage of the strategy's development, currently under way, is indicative of how far there is to go. It's about developing high-level goals for what Canadian adaptation policy is trying to achieve.

That's harder than it sounds, because it involves wrestling with something that has bedevilled adaptation policy makers worldwide: how to set concrete targets for something not easily quantifiable.

Unlike climate change mitigation, for which it is relatively simple to set targets such as Canada's current commitment to a 40-per-cent reduction in emissions from 2005 levels by 2030 (although much harder to meet them), there are no overarching metrics that can be attached to adaptation.

“Nobody has really figured it out – even the nations that one would say are leading in developing adaptation strategies,” said Ryan Ness, the adaptation research director at the Canadian Institute for Climate Choices, who is also on an advisory table the government has set up to help steer the strategy’s development.

The best-case scenario is establishing a suite of targets for readying different aspects of Canadian life for the extreme weather events to come. So Ottawa has set up five advisory tables – on health, infrastructure, nature, the economy and disaster response – to propose “transformational goals” along those lines. Each of the tables is co-chaired by a senior bureaucrat from the relevant federal department and by an outside expert, and has about 20 members drawn from related industries, think tanks, Indigenous groups, municipalities and other interests.

Some potential answers are more obvious than others. The infrastructure table, for instance, might be able to propose minimum thresholds for improving the flood resistance of the country’s building stock, or quantify other risks from potential extreme-weather damages. The nature table could suggest goals for preserving ecosystems that might help buffer the effects of storms and other extreme weather events. The health table could recommend targets for minimizing deaths and hospitalizations from heat waves.

It’s less clear where to even start with setting goals for something such as readying the entire Canadian economy – though the experts enlisted to help with that may be making some headway.

Sarah Burch, the executive director of the University of Waterloo’s Interdisciplinary Centre on Climate Change and co-chair of the economy table, said that indicators could be linked to investments by the public and private sectors in adaptation measures.

While stressing she was not saying where her group would land, she also cited “the availability and cost of insurance that would help communities recover from an extreme event, the ability of our domestic and international supply chains to withstand shocks, and the number of people working in sectors that are particularly exposed to climate impacts, like agriculture or tourism” as examples of where economic markers could be tracked.

But whatever the tables come up with in recommendations they are expected to submit to the government this month, it won’t be a substitute for political leadership. It will be up to Mr. Guilbeault and his colleagues to decide which targets are ambitious enough to meet the scale of climate change’s threats, yet achievable enough to drive policy making and enable meaningful accountability.

From there, the government will need to cobble the broad goals into a coherent framework strategy – expected to be released around March – that is straightforward enough to engage the public.

Then it will face the equally daunting task of fleshing out the framework into a more detailed version of the strategy, to be released later in 2022, that gives some indication of how to meet the objectives that have been set.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW ADVERTISEMENT



Mr. Trudeau, Governor-General Mary Simon and others arrive at the Senate for this past November's Throne Speech, which laid out the federal climate agenda in urgent terms. 'Our Earth is in danger,' Ms. Simon said.

ADRIAN WYLD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The Liberals have yet to indicate how policy-specific they intend to get in that later edition. They might not have quite figured it out themselves. The whole process after the completion of the framework is a bit murky, including whether the advisory tables will continue to play some role, or how else the government might seek outside input.

But there are at least a couple of ways Ottawa should be trying to lay out some substantive plans, if the strategy is to really break new ground.

The first is how the government will allocate the many billions of dollars in resilience spending to come.

If the goal-setting exercise produces strong targets, it should be possible to estimate investment needed to meet them. And the strategy should be able to identify some

relatively near-term program spending needs, which could be addressed as soon as next year's budget.

Before then, the Liberals may make good on commitments – such as \$500-million for fighting wildfires and a new national flood insurance program for high-risk homes – from the 2021 election campaign.

The calculus of future adaptation spending, though, will become more challenging, as Ottawa faces difficult decisions about how to ration resources amid more and more cries for help from across the country.

Not every danger will have an affordable solution, especially if it's being belatedly addressed. Governments might even have to make brutal choices about homes or entire communities being so vulnerable to climate risks that relocation is a better option than Band-Aid solutions.

Many of those decisions will be subject to evolving circumstances nobody can quite predict. But the strategy could help guide them.

The co-chair of the infrastructure table, Caroline Larrivée of the Quebec-based climate consortium Ouranos, said its members have had some preliminary discussions about possible “criteria for accessing funding.”

That has included, she said, how to prioritize supports for particularly vulnerable regions and marginalized populations, and whether to reward applications that show strong alignment among different interests in the communities seeking the money.

The strategy could build off that sort of thinking by starting to establish formulas or depoliticized agencies that ensure money goes where it's most needed, is spent in a way that really helps avoid future climate-related hardship – rather than mostly reacting to the latest tragedy – and avoids common pitfalls such as infrastructure dollars disproportionately going to electoral battlegrounds.

Realistically, those systems aren't going to be fully developed in a matter of months, before the strategy's scheduled completion. But if the Liberals are ambitious, they will at least get the ball rolling on them.

STORY CONTI



ILLUSTRATION BY THE GLOBE AND MAIL (PHOTOS: THE GLOBE AND MAIL, CP)

Another objective, for which there are clearer expectations for the process and without which the strategy will be a failure, is getting Ottawa better connected to people and organizations closer to the ground.

Leaders of the strategy's development go out of their way to note that it's not just about federal policy; it's about creating a pan-Canadian approach that engages and holds responsible all the other key actors from the provinces on down.

But they also admit there hasn't been sufficient co-ordination of adaptation policies to date.

“Do we have all of the right tools that we need to do that, right now, across different levels of government, between public and private sectors, with Indigenous communities?” Mr. Guilbeault said. “I think an honest answer is no. And I think part of this exercise is certainly for us to find ways to better co-ordinate.”

While the Environment Minister acknowledged that the consequences were evident in initially messy responses to 2021's climate-related emergencies (poor communication with remote Indigenous populations that were cut off by flooding in British Columbia

are an example) he also suggested some lessons from those responses had already been taken to heart.

He noted that a new committee to steer recovery from recent extreme weather events in the province, co-chaired by federal and B.C. ministers and featuring representatives of affected communities, was struck in the midst of the crisis.

But there is an enormous amount of bridge-building to be done as part of adopting a more comprehensive approach to national resilience, and avoiding – rather than merely responding to – tragic outcomes.

Ottawa has some work to do just in co-ordinating its own efforts. Five federal ministries play a central role in adaptation planning: Environment, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Infrastructure, Health and Natural Resources. Many more have pieces of it. They need to do a better job of all rowing in the same direction with the same sense of urgency.



Mr. Trudeau meets with Nova Scotia Premier Tim Houston in Ottawa. SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

All of Ottawa's provincial counterparts have to be engaged in some coherent way, too. In theory, that should be easier than with some other national priorities – including reducing greenhouse gas emissions – since there is little ideological disagreement around directly protecting populations from disaster. (Federally, the Liberals and Conservatives had very similar adaptation agendas in the last election campaign.)

But in practice, developing the strategy is liable to get bogged down in turf battles and funding disputes, or fall victim to poor working relationships, unless there are sustained efforts to prioritize it.

Then there is the challenge of being responsive to the very wide range of Canadian municipalities and communities at the front lines of dealing with climate effects, including small ones that struggle to be heard on the national stage.

The same goes for businesses. The insurance industry, to its credit, has been at the forefront thus far in sounding the alarm and helping shape public policy. But there are other sectors with different needs and perspectives that also need to be heard.

The process of working together should in itself create some collaborative momentum. The consultations have got roughly 100 important actors from across the country – and the governments and organizations they represent – talking to each other. Different federal departments are co-chairing the tables, and the work of fleshing out the plans over the balance of the year will require them to continue with engaging their provincial counterparts and stakeholders in one way or another.

But the strategy needs to establish longer-term structures that keep all those parties constantly in touch, and lead to shared decision-making and investment. That could mean organizations funded and led by multiple levels of government, intergovernmental committees or new financing systems.

The key is to ensure that Ottawa is not just delivering from the top down, that other levels of government and the private sector are not shirking their own responsibilities, and that they're not squandering precious time and resources tripping over each other.

Here, especially, the government should not be able to settle for the abstract when it releases its plan. The goal of an equitable collective effort on adaptation is already an obvious one to all concerned; it's time to get on with it.

That doesn't mean that even the fuller version of the strategy released later in the year will prove definitive. Already, there are warnings from those involved that it will best be viewed as a work in progress; even with the stakes as high as they are, there will have to be some trial by error.

"We can't wait until we have it all perfectly mapped out," Ms. Larrivée said. Instead, the country needs to "get started and learn from our mistakes."

Mr. Guilbeault made a similar argument. The government, he said, won't get everything right in its first stab at a national strategy. "We'll have to refine, to change, to adapt whatever agreement we come to."

The priority, clearly, is to get something out the door quickly enough to meet that sense of urgency, which will probably become all the more inescapable by year's end –

especially if another summer of extreme heat and communities ablaze leads to impatient questions about why the strategizing didn't happen sooner.

In November, the next edition of the annual United Nations climate conference – COP27 in Egypt – will have a stronger focus on adaptation than any previous one.

There is still a chance for Canada to show up there with some of the answers other countries are seeking, about how to be ready for changes to the planet that few can yet wrap their heads around. But there is a lot of work to do first.

This is the first article of a year-long focus on climate adaptation in the wake of a string of climate-related disasters in Western Canada.

Climate change in Canada: More from The Globe and Mail

THE DECIBEL

One of the most important things Canada can do to decarbonize is also the least glamorous: Overhauling the electrical grid. During the 2021 federal election, Adam Radwanski discussed what this would take and why Canadians should care. [Subscribe for more episodes.](#)

MORE FROM ADAM RADWANSKI

[Did the COP26 summit make a difference? Only if momentum turns into action](#)

['Radical pragmatist'? Canada's Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault insists he can be both](#)

[Trudeau's cabinet choices put the oil-and-gas sector on notice](#)

MORE ON CLIMATE INFRASTRUCTURE

[Why weren't B.C.'s dikes up to the job of stopping extreme floods?](#)

[Climate change will force small towns to make tough decisions – but small budgets mean minimal options](#)

[What Arctic communities on vanishing permafrost are doing to find safer ground to build on](#)