



# Living as if the future of our grandchildren mattered

by Dr. Emily Eaton

July 2020

## Living as if the future of our grandchildren mattered

*by Dr. Emily Eaton, Associate Professor, Department of  
Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Regina*

We are living in a time of crisis and a moment of upheaval. The long-held demands of the climate, Indigenous, Black Lives Matter, migrant worker, caregiver and other justice movements are gaining ground as people all over the world begin to recognize our inter-dependencies and strive to replace the theft and exploitation inherent in business-as-usual with a new and more just normal. With determination, we could build a post-Covid world that centres wellbeing and treats the planet as if the future of our grandchildren (especially Black, Indigenous and people of colour) mattered.

The future of our children and of our wellbeing is intimately tied to the future of our planet and its rich biodiversity. According to the [Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing 2019 report](#), Saskatchewan's environment is rebounding with a 3.1% increase in its environment indicator from 1994-2014 and progress exceeding 20% since the year 2000. The report attributes this progress to a "significant growth in energy production, reduction in residential energy use, and the availability of freshwater". However, as I will argue, growth in energy production should not be used as an indicator of wellbeing.

One of the gravest existential crises of our time is global heating. According to the 2018 IPCC report "[global warming of 1.5C](#)", we need to reduce global emissions 45% by 2030 and approach net zero emissions by 2050 if we want to avert the most catastrophic effects of climate change. Saskatchewan's per capita greenhouse gas emissions (at 67.7 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e) are [246% above the national average](#) of 19.6 tonnes and are some of the highest in the world, much larger than oil exporting countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Alarmingly, Saskatchewan's GHG emissions have increased by 75% since 1990. Saskatchewan carries a large moral and absolute burden when it comes to its contribution to global heating. Key to global wellbeing will be bringing down emissions to net zero in every jurisdiction across the world. If we don't do our part in Saskatchewan, another jurisdiction, that already produces fewer GHGs per capita, will have to compensate for our inaction.

Saskatchewan's oil and gas sector is the single biggest contributor to our provincial emissions at [32% of total emissions](#). Most alarmingly, many of these emissions come from waste products - natural gas that is produced alongside oil and is vented and flared into the atmosphere, or other fugitive emissions coming from well-head leaks, spills or other events. [Fully 19.3% of Saskatchewan's total emissions](#) came from these waste products from the oil and gas industry in 2017, up from 17.3% in 2015. In addition to GHG reductions in the oil and gas industry, Saskatchewan needs to see significant reductions in agriculture, electricity and transportation. But what this data really shows is that you or me individually turning our lights off or driving less are not going to get us the kind of deep reductions that we need to maintain a liveable planet.

### Saskatchewan GHG Emissions by Economic Sector, 2017

Source: Environment and Climate Change Canada, National Inventory Report, 1990-2017, 2019

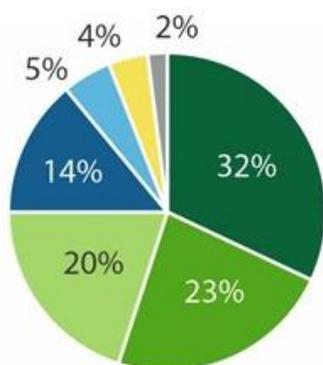


Image from: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/environmental-protection-and-sustainability/a-made-in-saskatchewan-climate-change-strategy/saskatchewan-emissions>

Oil and Gas    Agriculture    Electricity    Transportation  
Buildings    Heavy Industry    Waste and Others

The Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing must rethink its indicators for its chapter on environment. Does producing more energy lead to better environmental wellbeing? Even if we ignore the GHG emissions, producing more energy does not necessarily lead to enhanced lives or livelihoods. We would need to know about the distribution and use of that energy if we wanted to make claims about wellbeing. For example in some [recent research](#) about Regina's plan to be 100% renewable by 2050 we held focus groups with organizations representing marginalized communities in Regina. Several of our participants talked about their clients not being able to pay their rising energy bills on fixed incomes and about the poor state of insulation and repair in their rental housing. For these people, wellbeing could be enhanced greatly by energy and window retrofits to ensure proper heating and cooling and by energy rates and incomes that supported comfortable indoor temperatures. But the increase in energy use in our province is not primarily being consumed by these residents. [In 2017](#), industry consumed 59% of total energy demand in our province while residential demand was only at 8%. And much of the oil and gas that is produced in our province is exported to neighbouring provinces and the United States.

The increasing production of energy in our province (where fossil fuel extraction still makes up a significant part of the economy and where our electrical mix is still heavily [dependent on coal 40% and natural gas 44%](#)) is leading to serious liabilities for future generations. As the world begins to transition off of fossil fuels Saskatchewan risks stranding its economy in oil and gas and will face huge public costs associated with the clean-up of over [100,000 oil and gas wells](#). Saskatchewan is leaving a gaping climate liability to its own and the world's grandchildren, which will most certainly imperil our collective wellbeing.

More information on the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing: [saskwellbeing.ca](http://saskwellbeing.ca)

