

Rick Lindgren

From: <shawn.patrick.stensil@yto.greenpeace.org>
To: "mark winfield" <markw@pembina.org>; "Sarah Miller" <millers@lao.on.ca>; "Rick Lindgren" <r.lindgren@sympatico.ca>; <shawn.patrick.stensil@yto.greenpeace.org>; <swenar@cela.ca>; <dave.martin@yto.greenpeace.org>; "José Etcheverry" <Jose@daidsuzuki.org>
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Subject: Critics slam exemption for energy plan

This just went across the wires.....

Critics slam exemption for energy plan

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STEVE ERWIN

CANADIAN PRESS

Critics are accusing the Ontario government of behind-the-scenes moves to avoid environmental assessments of a controversial electricity generation plan that calls for the construction of new nuclear reactors.

The Liberal cabinet quietly passed a regulation Monday that exempts the province's 20-year energy strategy from environmental assessments.

Environment Minister Laurel Broten told the Ontario legislature Wednesday, however, that the government has legal advice indicating the law doesn't require Duncan's plan to be subjected to an assessment.

Broten and Energy Minister Dwight Duncan have said specific energy projects will receive assessments, and that any new nuclear reactor construction would be subject to federal assessments.

But activists from several environmental groups say the Liberals are trying to dodge a lengthy and potentially costly review of the plan so that they can roll ahead with nuclear and other projects without an assessment that would consider potential alternatives.

"In exempting the plan from the Environmental Assessment Act, the government is depriving Ontarians of the opportunity to fully understand the risks and costs of the province's electricity plan," Mark Winfield, director of the Pembina Institute, said Thursday.

The Liberals must have known their plan was at risk of a review, otherwise they wouldn't have passed the regulation exempting their \$70-billion electricity plan from environmental assessments, Winfield said.

But government officials say the regulation was passed, based on legal advice, to ensure that the Liberal interpretation of current environmental laws wouldn't be challenged.

Shawn-Patrick Stensil of Greenpeace Canada said the federal environmental assessment process is a

largely technical one that doesn't address environmental concerns.

Stensil accused Broten of "caving in" to the nuclear lobby by rewriting Ontario's environment protection laws, while New Democrat Leader Howard Hampton went one step further and called for her resignation. Broten was not immediately available for comment Thursday.

Environmental groups haven't yet ruled out a potential legal challenge to the exemption.

Environmentalists say they also want more opportunity for public input on the electricity strategy.

Jan Carr, head of the Ontario Power Authority, which has been advising the province on its electricity supply choices, said Thursday that his group will hold consultations on how to implement Duncan's objectives.