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Environment and Natural Resources: Two sides of the same coin

I've made no secret in this column and elsewhere over the past couple of years that I've been honoured to have had the opportunity to serve as Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change. Fighting climate change while promoting economic opportunity is the main reason I entered politics in 2015.

That being the case, some of you have asked me about the Prime Minister's decision to ask me to take on a new role as Canada's Minister of Natural Resources.

I have a deep affection for the Environment portfolio - and great pride in what we accomplished over the past couple of years on climate change, biodiversity, plastics and other important matters. But there is logic behind this move. Broadly speaking, it is in many ways a natural evolution.

My task over the past couple of years at Environment has been to lead the development of an aggressive policy and regulatory framework. That is now in place in the form of Canada's strengthened climate plan. The imperative now is to shift from plan development to fulsome implementation - in a manner that both reduces emissions and sets up our national and regional economies to thrive in a low carbon future.

This is a critical challenge for all countries, but particularly for countries like Canada in which the oil and gas sector plays a significant economic role.

The Department of Natural Resources needs to be on the front lines of making that happen. It has the mandate and resources for implementing programs involving energy production and consumption. It is, at its core, an economic portfolio - one that has many levers to affect a thoughtful and effective economic transition.

I've long said that, in the modern world, the environment and the economy must go hand in hand. And now the Prime Minister has asked me to work on demonstrating that's more than a sound bite.

Working shoulder to shoulder

While Canada's energy sector is an important economic driver, it is also currently the country's largest contributor to our unacceptably high

per-capita emissions. Earlier this year, our government made it the law that Canada's GHG emissions must be dramatically reduced by 2030. Our goal must be to work collaboratively with the oil and gas sector and other key industrial sectors - including steel, cement, auto manufacturing and others - to ensure they are part of a process that both reduces emissions and builds a sustainable and prosperous economy of the future.

Clearly there will be challenging conversations ahead. I am hopeful that my background and experience will assist me with my new challenge.

I began my career as a federal-provincial specialist representing Saskatchewan - one of the provinces likely to be more affected by this discussion. Later, my career as a CEO and senior executive in the clean technology sector provided an understanding of some of the workings of Canada's key natural resource sectors - energy, mining, and forestry.

Wide range of opportunities

My new assignment as Minister of Natural Resources provides an opportunity to work with the natural resource sector on economic opportunities that are available through a thoughtful transition - including renewable energy, biofuels, hydrogen, low carbon building products, energy efficiency retrofits, critical minerals, carbon capture, zero emission vehicles and associated refueling infrastructure, and more.

Within days of the recent cabinet shuffle, I was on my way to COP26 - the United Nations climate conference in Glasgow, Scotland - with my successor as Environment Minister, Steven Guilbeault.

As Steven and I have discussed at length, and as our joint interactions with other countries at COP underlined, the efforts of the departments of Environment and of Natural Resources are like two sides of the same coin - working collaboratively toward the same vital objective: to build a future for our children that sustains both a healthy environment and a prosperous economy.

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