

Minister dismisses coal as he readies energy strategy

TORONTO

Coal is a dirty word to Ontario's energy minister, who said yesterday he won't revisit plans to close the province's coal-fired electricity generators in favour of what critics say will be an expensive, multibillion-dollar plan to build new nuclear plants.

Dwight Duncan said yesterday he'll announce very soon — sources say likely next week — a long-awaited response to a December report by the Ontario Power Authority that called for \$70 billion in spending to ensure there's enough electricity for the province over the next 20 years, with more than half that money spent on nuclear power.

Duncan said that future won't include coal, which powers nearly one-fifth of Ontario's electricity supply. He said the province's four remaining coal plants will be closed, despite Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's assertions that the generators criticized for smog-causing emissions can be cleaned up.

On Monday, Klein said Ontario is being short-sighted in its vilification of coal amid the development of new technologies that he said can provide "very clean-burning coal operations."

"I would expect somebody who sells coal to say something like that," Duncan scoffed, noting Alberta produces some 80 per cent of Canada's overall coal supply. "Our constituents have a bigger concern — their air quality."

However, the Liberals are being accused of weakening Ontario's environmental assessment laws in an attempt to fast-track new nuclear plants.

Environment Minister Laurel Broten announced yesterday measures to streamline the environmental assessment process required on many industrial projects, including power generat-

ing stations. She said the new system will reduce the amount of time it takes to get answers on potential electricity, landfill and transit projects by one to three years, depending on the proposal.

New Democrat Leader Howard Hampton suspects the changes are being made so that the province can rush through environmental assessments of its energy strategy.

"It's very clear what the McGuinty government is up to here," Hampton said, calling Broten's initiatives "a plan to water down the Environmental Assessment Act."

Duncan said environmental assessments on new nuclear plants are conducted federally. He said that's appropriate since the province — which owns Ontario Power Generation — shouldn't conduct environmental assessments of its own assets.

But Hampton noted that a legal opinion prepared for environmentalists in February showed Ontario must conduct a proper environmental assessment of any plan to build new nuclear plants regardless of where they are built. Past nuclear projects in Ontario have gone billions of dollars over budget.

Ontario power officials say the report doesn't recommend nuclear power above other energy sources, but rather that nuclear power continue to account for about half of Ontario's electricity generation.

But anti-nuclear lobbyists note that the Ontario Power Authority's recommendations would require new reactors and refurbishments of existing ones at a cost of about \$40 billion and would create more headaches about storing radioactive waste.

• *Canadian Press*