

How Canada could benefit from a carbon budget

September 14 2020, by Kathryn Harrison



Greenhouse gas emissions from public electricity and heat production decreased to 70 Mt in 2018. Credit: Pixabay

Canadians have understandably been preoccupied by the COVID-19 emergency. Yet the climate emergency that prompted [hundreds of thousands to march in the streets](#) in September 2019 has not subsided.

Just as Canadians have worked together to "bend the curve" on COVID-19, so too must we [bend the curve on Canada's growing](#)

[greenhouse gas emissions](#). The [federal government](#) has committed to do just that: reduce emissions to 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 and to net-zero by 2050.

Yet Canada [is not on track](#) to meet even the 2030 target, and to achieve net zero in three decades [will be even more challenging](#). We need a clear plan—and soon.

Household budgets, carbon budgets

Experience tells us that setting emissions-reduction milestones, sometimes called [carbon](#) budgets, can help turn an ambitious, distant target into actionable, near-term steps.

Carbon budgets work a lot like financial planning. A monthly household budget keeps a family on track to save for future goals, such as retirement or the kids' post-secondary education. The [budget](#) is a mechanism of self-discipline to help the family achieve its longer-term objectives.

Similarly, emissions-reduction milestones could keep Canada on a path to meet its long-term climate target. But instead of allocating dollars to the family bank account, carbon budgets specify the quantity of emissions the country can produce over a specific time period en route to the long-term goal.

Emissions-reduction milestones aren't a silver bullet on their own. They require a broader [climate accountability framework](#) that gives milestones teeth, typically through independent expert advice and transparent reporting. Together with these features, milestones could enhance our ability to meet long-term targets in a number of important ways.

Why emissions milestones?

First, milestones chart a clear path forward. They provide a predictable trajectory to 2050 for policymakers, industry and investors, clarifying the level of effort required to get there.

Second, setting a series of milestones can enhance accountability. Canada's previous experience with emissions targets underscores how important this is.

Time and again, Canadian governments have promised to meet ambitious targets decades into the future. Yet, facing near-term challenges, [governments have succumbed to the temptation to defer tough decisions to their successors](#). Years later, with failure looming, subsequent governments have announced new, even more-distant targets.

Interim targets help governments stick with a long-term program by requiring them to produce detailed plans to reach a series of milestones. Regular monitoring and reporting—ideally by independent experts—allows the public to evaluate progress and hold their elected representatives to account.

Third, milestones enable course correction. Near-term milestones make it obvious if emissions aren't declining as intended, creating regular opportunities to revise plans and get back on course before it's too late.

Canada isn't starting from scratch

Emissions-reduction milestones are not a new concept in Canada. In 2018, Manitoba became the first province to adopt interim milestones. Its [Carbon Savings Account](#) sets five-year cumulative carbon budgets with support from an independent Expert Advisory Council. In 2019,

B.C.'s [climate change governance and accountability framework](#) introduced sector-specific emissions reduction targets.

Cap-and-trade systems in place in [Nova Scotia](#) and [Québec](#) could also transition to a milestones approach with additional accountability mechanisms.

Canada can also learn from international experience. The United Kingdom was the first country to adopt [legally binding targets and five-year carbon budgets](#) in 2008. Since then, many other countries have followed suit to implement their own emissions milestones and climate accountability frameworks.

Tough choices lie ahead

In 2019, the federal government committed to implementing ["five-year milestones" for carbon emissions](#). That will require answering some big questions.

Shared responsibility for [climate policy](#) among Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments presents unique challenges. Will milestones be set exclusively at the national level? Or will there be efforts to implement provincial, territorial or perhaps sectoral milestones as well?

Who will be responsible for implementing the policies needed to ensure that Canada-wide milestones are met? Will the federal government hold the primary role? If provinces are expected to contribute to meeting milestones, to what extent will there be incentives for participation or a federal backstop for weak ambition?

Even within a single government, targets won't implement themselves. What accountability mechanisms will be established to ensure co-

ordination of diverse government departments toward a coherent goal?

Perhaps most importantly in light of past experience, what accountability mechanisms can be built in to keep Canada on track? Will governments be able to adjust milestones as they wish or miss them without consequence?

Emissions-reduction milestones have a lot to offer Canada as it seeks a pathway to net-zero—though much like a family's long-term saving goals, adopting carbon budgets may be challenging at first. But as with family savings (and COVID-19), the sooner we get started, the better.

If the [government's](#) proposed five-year milestones are to have meaningful impact, Canada will need to tackle these complex questions head on—and soon.

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