



Environment, arts get short shrift in budget (Fedbudget-Losers)

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OTTAWA _ If tough economic times force governments to focus on priorities, they also make it crystal clear which areas are left at the bottom of the heap.

The environment, the arts, poverty and international aid are among the files that get short shrift in this year's budget.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives have come under fire in the past for a perceived lack of interest in and support for all of these files.

In the case of the environment, Equiterre's Stephen Guilbeault is crying false advertising.

Although Wednesday's speech from the throne said "nowhere is a commitment to principled policy, backed by action, needed more in addressing climate change," there are few budget measures directly related to reducing Canada or the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

"I thought last year we'd hit rock bottom. I think I was wrong," said Guilbeault.

The "Next Generation Renewable Power Initiative" will set aside \$100 million over four years for clean energy projects in the forestry sector. There is also a tax break for businesses that buy equipment that generates or conserves energy by using green technologies.

The government will put \$18.4 million over two years into Canada's annual reporting on environmental indicators, and \$8 million annually for a continuing program to protect the Great Lakes.

But other environmental programs lose ground.

The Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency will no longer conduct assessments on major energy projects, if they are already undergoing review by the Canadian Energy Board and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission.

A production incentive for producers of clean energy such as wind and

hydroelectricity is not being renewed, although a similar program in the United States will continue until at least 2012.

Robert Hornung of the Canadian Wind Energy Association expects investors and skilled workers will head south now that there is no real support for his industry.

"This is a government that said it had a strong interest in harmonizing its environmental policy with the United States, but by failing to take action in renewing this program, we're actually moving in the opposite direction," said Hornung.

Environment Minister Jim Prentice told The Canadian Press on Thursday that Canada and the U.S. would be focusing on regulations, rather than subsidies, to tackle greenhouse gas emissions. He noted that the countries are close to releasing new emissions standards for passenger vehicles.

Climate Action Network Canada had estimated that Canada should be spending \$320 million to \$420 million a year over the next two years to comply with the promise it made at the Copenhagen climate talks to help the developing world cut emissions.

That commitment was reiterated in the throne speech, but no money was earmarked for it in the budget.

Prentice said it's just a matter of time before the government releases details of its contribution.

"We haven't yet pegged the money, and the reason is we're continuing to have discussions with our international partners about what levels their contributions are going to be at," Prentice said.

A high-profile Harper promise to focus international aid on maternal and child health while hosting the G8 and G20 summits is not matched with any extra aid funding.

Like the environmental file, arts funding is another area where the government spent money in previous budgets but has now shut off the taps.

There are only passing references to cultural and heritage institutions in the throne speech and budget. The government announced \$540 million of arts, culture and heritage funding last year, spread over two years.

It notes that it hasn't forced cuts at institutions such as the CBC and the Canadian

Council for the Arts.

"The arts is a key driver. We've been talking to the television and telecommunications community _ they want investment and they want to make things happen," said NDP heritage critic Charlie Angus.

"They don't get it. They don't get that arts is a key industry."

There are also few measures in the budget to help the poor.

Single parents will get a tax break that allows them to keep more of the \$100 cheque they receive every month for each child under six. There is also an easing of the rules on charities, although it is unclear whether that will ultimately mean more money gets to those in need.

Dave Quist, utive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, says charities are usually the best bodies to help serve the poor Canadian families.

"I think they could have gone a lot further by increasing the charitable tax rate for that, and that would have helped a lot of those people," said Quist.

The government is putting money into a series of programs directed at aboriginals, including \$53 million over two years for child and family services initiatives, and \$45 million over two years for measures to help bring healthy food to people in remote areas.

The government had committed \$2 billion toward social housing and \$75 million toward renovations of federally run housing in last year's budget, and those funds are still being spent. Another \$300 million was also earmarked last year for First Nations housing.