

Oil industry should focus on working alongside renewable energy, former head of IEA says



Between Alberta's extensive natural gas reserves and the LNG Canada pipeline slated to come online on the B.C. coast in 2025, Maria van der Hoeven's projection holds a unique opportunity for Western Canada.

Julie Gordon/Reuters

Oil and gas producers should stop positioning themselves as victims and be more pro-active as the world pivots toward a low-carbon future, the former head of the International Energy Agency says.

Maria van der Hoeven, who headed up the Paris-based IEA for four years until 2015, also urged politicians, scientists and industry to work together on climate-change solutions, rather than pitting fossil fuels against renewables.

The new Alberta government has laid siege to what it believes are foreign-funded attacks on the province's oil and gas industry, launching a public inquiry into the funding of environmental charities and opening a \$30-million war room to counter misinformation about the sector.

But Ms. van der Hoeven said the focus should be on turning the world away from coal by figuring out how to marry gas-generated and renewable power sources, particularly in regions of Africa and Asia with rapidly growing energy consumption.

“If you only want to talk about renewables, you are forgetting that they’re intermittent, so you need to have something to back them up. But when you’re only talking about oil and gas in the traditional way, then you’re losing,” she said.

Speaking with The Globe and Mail ahead of the Petronas International Energy Speaker Series hosted by the University of Calgary, Ms. van der Hoeven said there’s no single solution to reducing carbon emissions.

But Ms. van der Hoeven, a former politician in the Netherlands, had a blunt message for those intent on looking backward to a time when oil was king.

“Open your eyes and look what’s going on in the world. If you really want to be in business in 10 years’ time, see to it that you make the necessary changes. Wake up and don’t position yourself as a victim,” she said.

She firmly believes gas will become “the fuel of the future, together with renewables,” pointing to both natural gas and growing interest in technologies that extract hydrogen from green sources and traditional oil reserves.

Between Alberta’s extensive natural gas reserves and the LNG Canada pipeline slated to come online on the B.C. coast in 2025, her projection holds a unique opportunity for Western Canada.

But she warned that the gas industry must halt methane flaring and better tell its story if it’s to compete with a global reliance on coal.

In short, she said, companies must be transparent and “walk the walk” on reducing carbon emissions, “not just talk the talk.”

“Some people are not really putting all the cards on the table and that needs to be done,” she said.

Ms. van der Hoeven would also like to see Canada and Europe share information, experiences and ideas about transitioning to a low-carbon future.

Ms. van der Hoeven led the IEA through a period of exceptional change in the global energy economy as supply and demand for oil and other major fuels saw a rapid shift from their traditional place. She added renewables and water use in energy production to the agency’s mandate, and urged ballooning economies such as India and China to share knowledge and ideas.

She’s now in the “fascinating” position of straddling fossil fuels and renewables as a board member of both French oil giant Total S.A. and the Rocky Mountain Institute, a non-profit that focuses on a low-carbon future.

Emma Graney
Globe and Mail
November, 2019