

Bitumen stand attacked

Alberta energy minister says proposed ban could be constitutional issue

By MARKUS ERMISCH, CALGARY SUN

UPDATED: October 1, 2008

Alberta's energy minister hasn't ruled out challenging the constitutionality of the prime minister's election campaign promise to ban bitumen shipments to Asia.

Mel Knight, speaking to reporters during the Energy Roundtable at the Ranchman's Club yesterday, said he was caught unaware by Stephen Harper's announcement, made Friday during a whistle stop in Calgary.

Harper said he wants to restrict bitumen exports to countries that don't match Ottawa's ambitions to reduce carbon emissions.

"It looks like a little bit of an intrusion to us," Knight said, noting that Alberta's government might examine whether such a ban could be constitutional.

An export ban or restriction of shipping a resource abroad, however, falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

Harper's comments came during an election campaign where the environment, and efforts to curb carbon emissions, are one of the dominating themes in the political debate.

Stephane Dion's Liberals, for example, have staked their political fortunes on a plan called Green Shift, which aims to dramatically reduce carbon emissions in Canada.

Knight said Harper's comments are best understood within that context, saying there's "a lot of rhetoric at times like this."

He said the comments are likely directed at a specific group the Conservatives are trying to persuade to vote for them Oct. 14.

Nonetheless, he said throughout the election, Canada's energy-rich province has had more of a rough ride than others, judging from comments emanating from several campaigns.

NDP Leader Jack Layton, in an airplane over Alberta during the early part of the campaign, had called for a stop of development in Alberta's oilsands, prompting Premier Ed Stelmach to respond that politicians should not forget Alberta's oil is important for the economy as a whole.

"I think there's a little Alberta-bashing going on right there," Knight said.

He also noted Harper's comments were lacking detail and it's best to wait until after the election to clarify the implications of the proposal, provided the Tories form government this fall.

But there might be very little to clarify, given the amount of bitumen shipped from Alberta is small.

Knight said he's not sure exactly how much is shipped across the Atlantic, adding the little that does make it to Asia is largely used for research, not for refining.

He said chances of that amount increasing are nil.