



**Pacific Institute
for Climate Solutions**



Insights Series: CleanBC Review

October 2025

Climate Policy and Polycrisis in British Columbia

Recommendations for future-proofing CleanBC

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Foreword

The Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions (PICS) was created in 2008 with an endowment from the Government of British Columbia to support evidence-based climate policy. This investment in our university-based network was groundbreaking and remains a core strength of the organization.

In fulfilment of PICS' mandate, this Insights Series elevates leading evidence at a pivotal moment for climate policy in B.C. Drawing on academic expertise from across the province, the series is designed to inform the 2025 independent review of CleanBC, British Columbia's plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change.

When CleanBC was launched in 2018, climate action was a public and political priority. While concern about climate change remains widespread, it has increasingly been overshadowed by more immediate pressures, such as rising costs of living, strained public services, and growing geopolitical instability. Intensifying climate impacts exacerbate each of these challenges, which increases the complexity and opportunity for bold climate solutions. Now is not a time to retreat from ambition. Rather, it is a time for integrated solutions and public policy that unlock energy transformation, reduce climate risk, and increase prosperity at local, regional, and global scales.

The Insights Series highlights the deep connections between climate action and other top issues facing British Columbians: housing, affordability, economic competitiveness, Indigenous reconciliation, regional economic development, and fiscal efficiency.

B.C.'s climate leadership can be renewed—not by repeating the strategies of the past, but by evolving CleanBC to meet the realities of today.

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Soubry B. *Climate Policy and Polycrisis in British Columbia: Recommendations for future-proofing CleanBC*. Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions; 2025.



Pedestrians watch as a forest fire flares up in the hills above Penticton in August 2021. iStock

Executive summary

British Columbia is facing not one crisis, but many—and they are hitting all at once, affecting and amplifying each other. Housing is inadequate and unaffordable, health systems are stretched thin, and fiscal and economic headwinds are growing stronger. Climate change is making each of these problems harder to manage.

“CleanBC 2.0 must serve as both a climate strategy and a governance tool to manage complexity.”

CleanBC 2.0 must serve as both a climate strategy and a governance tool to manage complexity, deliver co-benefits, and maintain public trust. Climate action cannot work in a silo, nor can it be designed as a top-down framework addressing one single problem. While CleanBC has spurred

measurable progress, such as lowering per capita emissions and accelerating clean technology adoption, it was not designed to respond to the full scale and urgency of today's interacting economic, social, and environmental pressures. The Government of British Columbia needs to take a renewed approach: one that aligns climate ambition with people's day-to-day priorities and strengthens public trust in government's ability to respond on all fronts.

This is a moment for B.C. to lead—not just on emissions targets, but on how governments navigate an era defined by complexity and compounding risk. The province's climate legacy, innovative spirit, and leadership in clean energy offer the tools to act now.

In this paper, we review the key threats B.C. faces, how climate change magnifies them, and the challenges that have limited CleanBC's impact. We consider the implementation

challenges CleanBC has faced and the opportunities for the Government of British Columbia to lead on climate policy once again. Finally, we offer four design principles to guide a renewed framework and regain the initiative:

1. Multi-solve for the polycrisis:

Recognize that housing, health, affordability, and climate are deeply connected, and build internal coordinating structures and policies that address them together.

2. Collaborate across departments:

Use CleanBC as a whole-of-government tool to unify strategies and goals with other crises, break departmental molds, and accelerate delivery.

3. Build flexibility, continuous learning, and nimble action into policy from the start:

Embrace systems thinking under conditions of uncertainty by shifting from rigid targets to adaptable, viable action-first policies that can evolve and scale.

4. Build popular support for climate action by focusing on affordability, prosperity, and energy security:

Lead with affordability, energy security, and prosperity, and make the financial benefits of action and costs of inaction visible.

Getting this right is not just about meeting climate goals; it is about strengthening public confidence and improving the lives of British Columbians.



Demonstrators in Vancouver demand actionable measures to address climate change. iStock



A freighter sits offshore near Victoria. iStock

Introduction

British Columbia is facing multiple overlapping, amplifying crises, of which climate change is arguably the largest and most dangerous, but the least well understood. But the existing policy framework for addressing climate change in the province, which seeks to limit further heating and protect people and infrastructure from the consequences climate heating is already unleashing, has fallen short of the government's commitments. The CleanBC framework, launched in 2018 and intended to guide climate action in the province, will not meet its 2030 targets.

“British Columbia is not just facing the climate crisis: it is facing a polycrisis, where multiple crises—social, economic, political, and environmental—affect and amplify each other.”

British Columbia is not just facing the climate crisis: it is facing a **polycrisis**, where multiple crises—social, economic, political, and environmental—affect and amplify each other, complicating the efforts of governments to address each challenge on its own terms. Top-down policy frameworks intending to solve a single problem are no longer effective in this context.

A revamped CleanBC framework can be truly effective and transformative only if it acknowledges the present polycrisis facing British Columbia and adjusts to account for it. In this paper, we review the various crises facing the province and their interactions and explain how climate change acts as a threat multiplier. We consider the implementation challenges that CleanBC has faced so far, and the opportunities still available for British Columbia to lead on climate policy once again. Finally, we offer some high-level recommendations to guide efforts to improve and update the CleanBC framework.



A complex set of crises has worsened the issue of homelessness throughout B.C. *iStock*

Understanding B.C.'s polycrisis

British Columbia is experiencing the collision of long-mounting **stresses**—increasing socioeconomic inequality, climate heating, or demographic change—and sudden **trigger events**, like a devastating heat dome or the declaration of a global pandemic. When these collisions occur between systems—like health care, housing, the economy, and climate—the conditions create a polycrisis.

“Climate chaos is not a problem of the era; it defines the era.”

Of these stresses, climate change is the largest and most influential, a “threat multiplier” that worsens other planetary stressors, like the rise of political authoritarianism, zoonotic disease, mass migration, biodiversity decline, and food scarcity.¹ British Columbia is already feeling interactions between these effects, as we will describe below. They will

likely grow more impactful in any number of ways, whether through mass migration, a destabilized political climate, or food security becoming more fragile due to biodiversity loss and climate change. Climate chaos is not a problem of the era; it defines the era.

To understand the need for policy that responds across B.C.'s current challenges, we need to understand how these crises interact with and amplify climate impacts today and in the future.

Physical and mental health stresses

As the site of one in every three apparent drug-related deaths in Canada, British Columbia is “ground zero for the drug toxicity crisis”² with rising overdose death tolls and increasingly unsafe supply.³ Despite historic investments in supports for mental health in 2023, further investment



A car on Vancouver's Skytrain during the COVID pandemic. iStock

has stalled, and British Columbians continue to experience greater-than-average barriers to mental health, addictions, and substance use health services.² Residents also face challenges accessing primary care, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put B.C.'s health system under unprecedented strain. Seven hundred thousand British Columbians have no family doctor, while physicians are overwhelmed by the complexities of navigating a fragmented health system.⁵ Nursing positions across the health system are chronically understaffed.⁶ While the 2025 provincial budget avoided additional cuts, health advocacy groups have pointed out the challenge of continuing to provide adequate care without further investments.⁷

“Unchecked climate impacts will put additional pressure on an already-overstretched provincial health-care system.”

These challenges will grow intractable as climate heating intensifies. Climate impacts are projected to worsen health outcomes across Canada as heat waves, new illnesses, and extreme weather events strain health systems and disrupt lives and livelihoods.⁸ The 2021 heat dome, which

climate heating made 150 times more likely,¹⁰ killed 619 people across the province.⁵¹ Health fatalities and heat costs will continue to rise; the cost of ground-level ozone exposure, which increases with rising temperatures, has been projected to cost Canada \$86 billion per year by 2050.⁸ Climate-related health impacts will hit equity-deserving populations and the economically disadvantaged hardest.¹ They will exacerbate the mental health crisis in British Columbia, whether chronically (increased suicides and addictive disorders) or systemically (increased anxiety and affective disorders).⁹ Unchecked climate impacts will put additional pressure on an already-overstretched provincial health-care system, increasing costs and demand on aging infrastructure and overdrawn personnel.

Inflation and cost-of-living stresses

Economic pressures caused by international trade wars, inflation, and the ongoing results of supply chain disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic are exacerbating the issue of affordability in British Columbia, especially in the housing sector. Homelessness is increasing, especially in equity-deserving populations.¹¹ The cost of renting and owning homes has skyrocketed as speculation and demand for housing have outstripped new construction.⁴ The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation estimates that British Columbia needs to build 610,000 more homes above current building trends by 2030 in order to provide adequate housing.⁴ Despite making significant advances in housing policy, including passing a raft of reforms to allow for denser and more affordable homes,¹² the government remains under significant pressure to deliver more.

Contending with inflation and cost-of-living stresses necessarily involves contending with climate change. Climate-related damages cost the average Canadian household \$700 a year,¹³ while extreme weather events, many of which have wrought horrific damage to towns and cities,¹⁴ will continue to increase in frequency and intensity as emissions rise.¹ Climate impacts will be most severe for low-income homeowners and renters without the means to transition to low-emissions energy sources or retrofit their homes.¹ Additionally, the building sector represents 14 per cent of provincial emissions.¹⁵ New housing in the province will need to be as low-carbon as possible, while remaining affordable and resilient to climate impacts.

Fiscal and governance stresses

The current government is under mounting financial pressure from increased public spending, projecting an \$11 billion deficit in the 2025 budget.¹⁶ Though the government has said the spending is necessary in order to help address the stresses detailed above, a significant deficit with no perceivable increase in quality of life is, according to the Fraser Institute, eroding public trust and multiplying tensions in political discourse.¹⁷ Additionally, the current New Democratic Party government lost its majority after a divisive election in 2024, weakening its legislative clout.¹⁸ The supply and confidence agreement between the governing NDP and assisting Green Party has assured some mid-term stability, but lack of progress on climate issues has led to discontent from the Greens, endangering the stability of the agreement.¹⁹

Beyond internal government issues, B.C. has not been immune to the rise of populism, misinformation, and deepening political divides that have characterized the rest of Canada's social and political discourse in recent years.²⁰ The government has been forced to cancel several headline policies, including the province's carbon tax, to maintain popular support.²¹

Managing crises means prioritizing climate

Already, the stresses mentioned above are interacting in British Columbia, compounding problems and hamstringing the government's capacity to act. Three recent examples include:

1. The consequences of 2021's twin climate disasters:

The June 2021 heat dome and November 2021 severe floods were extreme weather events supercharged by climate change. The heat dome caused widespread damage to marine and forest ecosystems, sparked fires that devastated the community of Lytton, and exacerbated existing inequalities, with heat deaths concentrated among low-income renters. The atmospheric river extreme rainfall event caused intense flooding that devastated agriculture in the Fraser Valley, severed Vancouver's rail and road connection to the rest of the country, and caused an estimated \$285 million in damage.

2. Fiscal consequences of ending the carbon tax:

Due in part to the national shift in political attention from climate to affordability, the B.C. government announced it



The remains of houses burned down by the wildfire that consumed Lytton on June 30, 2021. *iStock*

would eliminate the provincial consumer carbon tax a few days after the federal government's announcement of the end of the federal consumer carbon tax.²² Although the tax was beneficial to consumers in the long run,²⁴ "the policy became absolutely toxic with British Columbians," the premier said.²³ In doing so, however, the government lost a \$1.5 billion source of revenue, further increasing its overall deficit and reducing the funding available for health-care and housing reform. By reacting to one stimulus in order to preserve popularity and reflect the national mood, the government has hobbled its ability to address other crises that could become its legacy, especially as climate change continues to increase housing and health costs.²⁵

3. Lack of coordination in extreme heat management:

In 2023, in the context of more frequent and intense climate-induced heat waves, the government announced a \$10 million grant to provide free air conditioners to vulnerable citizens, largely to lower-income seniors.²⁶ Yet the program was lambasted by critics as a piecemeal approach to extreme heat, one which ignored the intersecting crises of climate, housing, health, and affordability.²⁷ Climate experts considered the program myopic and ignorant of the increased energy costs of air conditioning as a long-term strategy, compared to high-efficiency heat pumps that provide both heating and cooling.²⁸ The program ignored these cost implications, meaning the province was unprepared when landlords denied residents' requests to install air conditioning units.²⁹ Health advocates called for far more systemic solutions, including energy poverty programs, more integrated senior health programs, and a longer-term climate and health strategy.³⁰ The program is a clear example of disjointed, reactive governance.

“Futureproof policy in an era of polycrisis requires radically different governance mechanisms.”

Deploying futureproof policy in an era of polycrisis requires radically different governance mechanisms than those previously deployed. Policymakers must understand the interactions among enmeshed crises, build adaptive governance structures, and recognize the need to engage stakeholders and governance levels across the board.



Aerial view of Westridge Marine Terminal at the Port of Vancouver. iStock

Stress-testing the CleanBC framework

CleanBC has built on British Columbia's record as a climate leader, providing a nationally and internationally advanced environmental policy framework. The province had already put into place world-class environmental legislation—the 2008 provincial carbon tax, which raised revenue for further transition activities, and the 2010 Low Carbon Fuels Requirements, which reduced B.C.'s fuel carbon intensity by 13 per cent over twelve years.³¹

The CleanBC framework was hailed for setting best-in-Canada, progressively ambitious, long-term targets for low-carbon building performance and supporting policies.³² Building on B.C.'s Climate Action Toolkit, the initial framework set a target to lower greenhouse gas emissions by 40 per cent by 2030 compared to 2007 levels, using revenue from the province's now-defunct consumer carbon tax to support emissions-reduction projects from large industrial operations

through the CleanBC Industry Fund. British Columbia was also the first Canadian jurisdiction to enshrine climate accountability into law.³²

“There is a major gap between the province's targeted emissions trajectory and actual progress.”

Yet the framework has also experienced significant challenges. There is a major gap between the province's targeted emissions trajectory and actual progress: while emissions have fallen in the province since 2018, British Columbia may achieve only half of its 40 per cent reduction target by 2030.³³ Emissions reduction policies have proven

insufficient. Significant emissions reductions policies have fallen by the wayside, notably:

- » The Clean Transportation Action Plan, which was an early commitment from the framework, has made no notable progress, despite receiving submissions for multiple years.³⁴
- » A provincial cap on oil and gas emissions has been repeatedly delayed, partly due to uncertainty with the federal government's own emissions cap, and partly due to industry pushback from increased compliance costs.³⁵



A coal terminal in Prince Rupert loads metallurgical coal, thermal coal, and petroleum coke. *iStock*

Critics argue that the original CleanBC framework provided only vague targets for industrial emissions, including oil, gas, and freight, some of the province's highest polluters.³⁶ Other critics argue that the government's climate policy shows clear influence from emissions-heavy industries such as oil and gas, and that public funds spent on decarbonizing the gas industry would be better spent deploying renewable energy infrastructure and preparing for an eventual phaseout of fossil fuels in the province.³⁷

Climate policy advocates in the province are in a bind. Politically, climate change has become a divisive issue, with the opposition Conservative party denouncing further emission reductions measures as fiscally irresponsible.³⁸

Public attention has largely shifted towards affordability and security, with an authoritarian and erratic U.S. president threatening catastrophic trade and energy disruptions.³⁹

There remains an opportunity for B.C. to build a climate framework that responds to the polycrisis while strengthening climate action, but only if those drafting the policy are willing to break old patterns of governance and learn from its previous challenges. The province has been a climate policy leader for decades. Its strategic positioning in the Cascadia region as an energy provider and trade hub, combined with a federal government committed to significant infrastructure projects, gives it influence and opportunity in a clean energy transition.⁴⁰ If planned well, a revitalized CleanBC is an untold opportunity to embed polycrisis governance into climate policy. It can champion not only a clean energy transition, but also security, affordability, and reliability for systems across B.C. and the rest of Canada.



Contending with inflation and cost-of-living stresses necessarily involves contending with climate change. *iStock*

Recommendations for polycrisis-proofing CleanBC

The emerging literature around polycrisis governance is clear: climate policy amidst a polycrisis must do more than prepare for or respond to shocks. Effective policy must be rooted in cross-sectoral collaboration, flexible decision making, continuous learning, and multi-solving, advancing cross-cutting policies and investments that address multiple problems in different sectors.

“Policy should improve health and well-being, produce savings, and advance long-term climate goals all at once.”

Based on the analysis of B.C.’s polycrisis laid out above, we propose the following four design principles to guide CleanBC’s reformulation:

1. Multi-solve for polycrisis.

The Government of British Columbia must recognize that the crises it faces are interrelated and amplify each other, and the revised CleanBC framework must account for this interconnectedness at a governance level. Climate adaptation planning, for example, needs to take into account calls for housing reform and energy poverty strategies.⁴¹ It also needs to build in messaging to argue that investments in climate mitigation are directly linked to cost savings in health care. Policy should be created to “multi-solve” across crises—that is, improve health and well-being, produce savings, and advance long-term climate goals all at once.⁴²

By taking a polycrisis governance approach, the revised CleanBC framework can lay out clear pathways to cooperation between government departments and sectors. At minimum, the provincial government should build a centralized office for polycrisis management, ensuring communication between high-level policymakers and ensuring that efforts are coordinated across issue management teams. More specifically, by creating policy frameworks based on problems to be solved rather than sector barriers, policy solutions could involve experts and stakeholders across departments.

2. Collaborate across departments.

Polycrisis literature shows that a unified strategy to tackle multiple crises is key to building effective collaboration among government departments and stakeholders.⁴³ It has become a platitude to impel governments to break departmental silos, but the literature is clear: studies of COVID-era governance show that countries that made explicit and soft links between industries, social needs, and the overwhelming health crisis emerged with a better capacity to innovate and balance short- and medium-term goals.⁴³ A unified strategy like a climate framework can, if well-drafted, serve as a valuable starting point for addressing other crises and for breaking departmental molds.⁴⁴

Studies of effective policy response to the polycrisis all point to the need for “enhancing internal administrative cooperation”⁴³ to allow for strategic crisis management with a wide-angle view. Governments must make transparent decisions, communicate them effectively, and refer them to shared goals. These decisions must also take into account the important role of local governments in facilitating coordination, especially with central authorities.⁴⁵

3. Build flexibility and continuous learning into policy from the start to enable action.

CleanBC must be built to evolve alongside the polycrisis. Building immovable policies rather than a slate of options can cause situations in which governments double down on existing institutions despite clear failures, or scrap good policies that could have created financial benefit, such as the B.C. carbon tax. Environmental governance within the EU, for example, suffered under COVID-19 when the crisis led policymakers to double down on pre-existing institutional choices, despite evidence that the policy



A paramedic assists a patient on a stretcher outside Victoria General Hospital's emergency department, Victoria, B.C. iStock

needed to evolve to respond to the unfolding economic and health crises.^{43, 44} Governments will need to embrace systems thinking under conditions of uncertainty, and build frameworks that can shift to accommodate new information and global developments.

Governance in a polycrisis or “at the edge of chaos,” as Waldrop describes it,⁴⁶ requires keeping as many options open as possible, so a policy maximizes robustness and results in the face of an ill-defined future. This requires policies that build in opportunities for restructuring and long-term adaptation, rather than set paths with binary outcomes. Outcomes need to be considered from the point of view of political and technical viability under changing circumstances rather than absolute optimization.⁴⁷ Rather than taking a top-down perspective on objective-setting, goals may need to be prioritized based on whether they align with already-expressed priorities from stakeholders.⁴⁸

The CleanBC review should identify viable actions that can be undertaken immediately, build momentum, and produce clear benefits for stakeholders. The previous iteration of CleanBC set long-term targets that became so complex and costly that policy actions were never enacted in the first place. Moving from target-oriented to action-oriented climate policy will help avoid the “planning trap” of high-level targets. Balancing these does not dilute climate action; rather, it creates conditions where

actions can be quickly taken and the solution space filled, rather than setting technically challenging and politically unworkable goals.⁴⁹

A review of CleanBC should integrate broad coalitions from industry, communities, and levels of government to identify short-term and mid-term actions, avoiding the pitfall of top-down targets without the support of those sectors that must work to meet them. Establishing common objectives between the framework and broader civil society will also ensure that these objectives remain in place regardless of potential changes in government.

4. Build popular support for climate action by focusing on affordability, prosperity, and energy security.

Financial arguments against climate action are easy to build in a political context where balanced budgets are seen as the singular metric of fiscal prudence, and where other seemingly unrelated crises demand attention. Yet when the cost of inaction on climate change mitigation or adaptation is integrated into governance frameworks, it becomes clear that heavy investments from government are still smaller than the potential damages to health care or housing caused by not investing in the first place.^{8, 13}

If climate action is to remain front of mind in provincial governance, CleanBC's reviewed framework needs to state its economic benefits as clearly as possible. Where the immediate financial benefits are difficult to calculate, the framework must show the costs of inaction, integrating financial metrics like the social cost of carbon into its cost-benefit analyses.⁵⁰

In addition to economic justifications, climate policy also needs to build broad coalitions that will defend the policy framework against potential political retrenchment. Studies of health and climate "multi-solving" efforts identified that initiatives that brought stakeholders together to design community projects with climate in mind saw system-wide benefits that vastly exceeded costs and created other incommensurable benefits.⁴²

“If climate action is to remain front of mind in provincial governance, CleanBC’s reviewed framework needs to state its economic benefits as clearly as possible.”

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