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Job safety overtakes environment as top concern

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Page: B3

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Canadians and Americans want companies to express their social responsibility by creating jobs and maintaining employment - a shift from a focus on environmental issues - according to a new poll.

While environmental issues are still important to consumers, the survey shows, they have slipped down the priority list as worries over job losses take the top-of-mind position.

The poll, conducted in January and February by the Strategic Counsel, asked 1,500 Canadians and 1,500 Americans what kinds of activities corporations should support, in the current economy.

A top priority, from about 47 per cent of those who responded, was for companies to create jobs and rescue the economy.

Forty-four per cent said firms should try to keep employees, instead of laying them off. An equal number said companies should assist food banks and shelters.

About 21 per cent said firms should support environmental initiatives.

"Two years ago [the jobs issues] wouldn't have even been on the radar of North Americans," said Tim Woolstencroft, managing partner at the Strategic Counsel. "We've seen a radical transformation of the issues that people believe are most crucial to them personally, and to the country."

Not long ago environmental initiatives were right at the top of the list of crucial issues that people wanted companies to tackle, he said. Now, from the corporate social responsibility perspective, "they want corporations to focus on the fundamentals of the economy."

Mr. Woolstencroft said companies that are involved in green initiatives should be rethinking the relevance of those activities.

But Adine Mees, president of the advisory group Canadian Business for Social Responsibility, said it not an either-or decision. "I'm not seeing this as 'jobs versus the environment' as we may have seen in a more obvious way in the past," she said. Companies should, instead, be getting inspiration from U.S. President Barack Obama and his vision of an economy fuelled by new, green jobs, she said.

Still, it is no surprise that "jobs are top of mind for everyone right now," she said, especially as more people are poised to slip below the poverty line.