THE HILL TIMES

The missing critical mineral underpinning Canada's entire defence and industrial strategy

Canada cannot meet its defence and industrial goals without securing the critical steelmaking input: metallurgical coal.

In October 2025, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Tim Hodgson said the federal government would use the Defence Production Act to safeguard critical minerals vital to Canada's economic and national security interests, but something is missing from the list, writes W. Brett Wilson. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

Opinion

By W. Brett Wilson

Feb. 25, 2026

Canada is entering a decisive moment in its industrial and security future. The federal government has made clear that it intends to accelerate defence priorities, fortify critical infrastructure, and fast-track nation-building projects needed to strengthen sovereignty, resilience, and economic security. The country's ambitions in defence readiness, major project acceleration, and strategic industrial expansion rely on one foundational material: steel. And steel, at any meaningful scale, cannot be made without metallurgical coal.

It is the quiet commodity that underwrites nearly every major policy objective in Ottawa's playbook. Steel supports Canada's national security, defence platforms, and critical energy infrastructure, in addition to the ports, rail systems, transmission corridors, bridges, and strategic transportation networks that underpin a strong and resilient economy. From military vehicles and equipment to sovereignty-driven infrastructure and major project acceleration, these priorities all begin with steel. And yet, the critical input that makes steel possible remains absent from Canada's Critical Minerals List.

When Ottawa updated its Critical Minerals List in 2024, it added high-purity iron ore; one half of the steelmaking equation. Its essential counterpart, metallurgical coal, meets—and in several respects exceeds—every criterion the federal government uses to define a critical mineral. Leaving it off the list creates a gap in Canada's industrial strategy at the very moment allies are moving to secure this material.

W. Brett Wilson is an entrepreneur, philanthropist, and member of the board of directors for Valory Resources. *Handout photograph*

Our allies are moving ahead of us. The United States, European Union, South Africa, and New Zealand have already classified metallurgical coal as a critical or strategic material, explicitly linking steelmaking inputs to national security and economic resilience. China's strategic management and dominance of critical mineral production amplifies the urgency. In an era of geopolitical uncertainty and competition, no advanced economy can afford to outsource the materials that build its infrastructure, electric grid or defence platforms.

Ottawa has signalled that it understands this risk but it needs to take it further. The federal government announced it would use the Defence Production Act to accelerate and safeguard critical minerals vital to Canada's economic and national security interests. The message was clear: we must de-risk supply chains that underpin defence manufacturing and industrial capacity.

But this commitment remains incomplete until metallurgical coal, one of the most strategically important inputs into defence-grade steel, is formally recognized as critical. Ships, armour, vehicles, and even the infrastructure that supports NORAD modernization all begin with steel. A defence strategy that overlooks metallurgical coal is built on good intentions, not supply chain security.

This gap is even more puzzling given Canada's unique advantage. Alberta hosts some of the world's highest-quality, undeveloped low-volatile metallurgical coal deposits. This is exactly the kind of secure, sustainable supply our allies are eager to source from trusted partners.

Valory Resources' work is a prime example of what responsible development can look like in the next generation of Canadian mining. Modern underground operations with Indigenous partnerships, and rigorous environmental practices represent the type of private-sector investment Canada needs. Alberta has some of the highest quality steelmaking coal anywhere in the world, and we can supply the globe with it via projects that strengthen Canadian industrial resilience, support economic reconciliation, and create high quality jobs across engineering, logistics, rail, ports, manufacturing, and steelmaking.

Global supply is tightening at the very moment demand for metallurgical coal is rising, driven by global infrastructure build-out, defence manufacturing, and the continued centrality of steel to modern economies. As the need for reliable, high-quality metallurgical coal grows, supply is becoming more constrained and more strategically important within global

value chains. China continues to use its market influence as leverage in increasingly competitive global supply chains. In contrast, Canada has the stability, geology, expertise, and partnerships to be a trusted supplier for decades—if we choose to act.

Recognizing metallurgical coal as a critical mineral would not weaken environmental protection or accelerate approval processes. What it would do is send a clear signal to investors, allies, and the Canadian manufacturing sector: this country understands its industrial foundations, and intends to secure them. It would align Canada's industrial, defence, and trade strategies with the realities of modern steel production.

The window is open, but not indefinitely. Our allies have already acted. Canada should not allow this strategic advantage—one of the few in which it holds genuine global strength—to be overlooked.

If Canada is serious about a "Buy Canadian" value-added strategy, rebuilding domestic manufacturing capacity, doubling non-U.S. exports, and securing materials that underpin both clean growth and national security, then metallurgical coal must be added to Canada's Critical Minerals List.

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