

Don't restrict use of coal for power



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That the Earth's climate may be changing has become a matter of relatively broad acceptance scientifically, politically and culturally, even though disagreements remain regarding the extent to which human activity is a contributing factor.

Nonetheless, the existence of broad public agreement has significantly changed the politics of establishing a national energy policy in the United States.

Make no mistake, climate change is all about energy, and virtually anywhere in the world, energy is about economics and quality of life. Consequently, a main focus of the debate must be to develop and pursue policies to address climate change while still allowing our economy to grow and our population to continue to enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world. To do that requires us to use diverse sources of energy and not impose unwise and artificial restrictions on our most abundant source of energy — coal.

UNFORTUNATELY, THAT'S exactly what will happen should some in the Congress get their wish. Congress is considering the America's Climate Security Act of 2007. This act mandates huge reductions in the release of carbon dioxide. But its goals are flatly unattainable.

The act mandates reduction in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020 — with a further target of 65 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. The technology to do this does not exist; meaning the only way to meet these targets is to substantially curtail activities that release greenhouse gases. And since most greenhouse gases are created by industrial activity and transportation, the only way to meet the targets in the act is to substantially curtail economic growth.

The American public wants to do its part to limit global warming, but not at the expense of our quality of life and economic livelihood. By some estimates, this measure would result in a net loss of 2.3 million jobs by 2015, with a corresponding increase in the cost of electricity of between 35 and 65 percent. This would have a chilling effect on the entire U.S. economy — no sector would be unaffected and the resulting drop in Gross Domestic Product would be felt by all.

AMERICA IS a growing economy and a growing population. We need to focus on developing new technologies and using the resources we have to meet our energy needs. Placing unachievable and arbitrary restrictions on the release of certain greenhouse gases will hurt the economy

and hurt American families. But perhaps the most dangerous effect of the act would be to mandate a sharp reduction in the use of coal — our most abundant energy resource.

The U.S. sits on the largest coal reserves in the world — a source of energy that will last hundreds of years and,

which we are proving, can become a clean and efficient pillar of our national energy policy, easing our dependence on risky and expensive foreign oil and continuing to power our economy. The coal industry employs 160,000 Americans. And, coal generates more than 50 percent of our electricity. It's a source of energy that simply cannot be ignored or regulated out of existence. The peril to our national security and economy is simply too great.

Limiting the use of coal will have far-reaching negative consequences that will affect virtually every American family and business. In addition to causing the cost of electricity to rise dramatically, limiting the use of coal will force us to use more natural gas — more than we can produce. This will cause gas prices to skyrocket and will do nothing to address what most Americans say should be our number one energy priority — reducing our dependence on foreign sources of fossil fuels, especially oil and natural gas.

THERE ARE no easy answers or quick solutions to building America's 21st century energy policy. But one thing is clear: solving the energy puzzle, making coal even cleaner and more efficient, and working to improving energy efficiency at all levels can only be achieved through the development of new technologies. A top priority must be to clean up older coal-fired plants and to move quickly to build next generation plants that are clean and efficient.

But, in addition to making coal clean and safe, we must allow exploration for oil and natural gas in the United States. It's one thing for some to demand the use of gas for generating electricity. It's another for these same groups and individuals to deny us the ability to explore for and recover new sources of gas in America. And we must continue to develop other sources of energy including wind, solar and nuclear.

Americans are up to this challenge. We have the resources, the technologies and the know how to do the job. The question is: Do we have the wisdom?

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