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Oil, coal, gas, nuclear - all are needed for U.S. energy security

By Robert W. Chase

Is there any doubt that few things in Ohio are more important than the supply of energy? In this region of the United States, we've benefited from huge reserves of oil, natural gas and coal for so long that we've taken them for granted. But the increasing need for energy - and the escalation in fuel costs over the past two years - has reminded us that doing something about it is never simple.

As gasoline prices reached \$4 a gallon, we learned a hard lesson: Our government's decades-old ban on offshore drilling is nonsensical. We live in the age of advanced energy technologies, but our policies are guided by the mistaken notion that oil spills would result from drilling in coastal waters. Quite to the contrary, oil companies use sophisticated seismic imaging to find and recover oil and natural gas from deposits miles beneath the ocean floor. But some members of Congress seem to believe we still rely on technology older than most Americans.

We must - and we can - adopt better energy policies. For all the hoopla over solar and wind energy, they are intermittent and undependable. Electricity cannot be stored and must be used as it is produced. On days when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing, fossil-fuel power plants are needed as back-ups.

Increased production of our key energy sources - oil and natural gas, coal and nuclear power - would strengthen our economy, create more jobs and enhance our nation's energy security.

I'm confident that stepped-up domestic energy production will help rebalance the supply-demand picture and push the innovation frontier in ways that lead to new energy technologies.

The economic ripple effects from new technologies are substantial. Thanks to advanced drilling technology, companies are now able to release natural gas trapped in shale beds found throughout the United States, especially in Texas and the Appalachian region. As a result, domestic gas production rose 8.8 percent in the first five months of this year and 6 percent in 2007, following a decline of more than 20 percent in the last decade alone. According to a recent study by expert geologists, there could be as much as 842 trillion

cubic feet of recoverable natural gas in shales around the country, enough to supply U.S. needs for the next 40 years.

But so great is America's demand for natural gas that last year this country accounted for half of the world's growth in natural gas consumption. In order to replace production from depleted domestic wells and meet rising demand, Congress needs to lift the barrier on oil and gas production in 85 percent of the Outer Continental Shelf that's closed to energy development. Above all, U.S. industries need affordable supplies of natural gas to stay competitive in the international marketplace.

It's hard to see what anyone would gain from a continuing moratorium on the sale of government leases for oil-and-gas production in the Atlantic, Pacific and eastern Gulf of Mexico. U.S. oil imports have reached the 70-percent mark - and are rising. Our country sends upwards of \$2 billion daily to oil-producing countries throughout the world, some of which are hostile to U.S. interests. Federal bans on offshore drilling in U.S. coastal waters reduce oil supplies and raise prices. And such bans make us look foolish, since foreign oil companies are drilling in Cuba's coastal waters barely 50 miles from Florida.

Those who maintain that offshore drilling is unsightly and risky are wrong. Proposed bipartisan legislation would require that drilling be done far enough out to sea so that rigs cannot be seen from shore. Moreover, horizontal drilling has dramatically reduced the need for rigs.

And studies show that the drilling itself is being done with little or no harm to the marine environment. There has not been a large oil spill from an offshore platform in the United States in almost 40 years. The National Academy of Sciences determined that just 2 percent of the oil in North American waters is from offshore drilling.

Another key to U.S. energy security is clean-coal technology. Our country has a 250-year supply of coal. Developing methods for capturing carbon dioxide emissions from coal plants and then storing the gases underground is an achievable goal. But once the technology for this process is developed, large-scale demonstrations will be needed to make sure it is practical and affordable.

Long-term federal funding to support development and demonstration of the technology will be essential, since the U.S. Energy Information Administration expects coal use to rise and remain the dominant fuel used in generating electricity. Keep in mind that Ohio obtains 86 percent of its electricity from coal.

The performance of U.S. nuclear power plants has greatly improved. Last year, nuclear plants, on average, were producing electricity 91 percent of the time, compared to 60 percent in 1980. Safe and reliable, nuclear power has a bright future in the United States and throughout the world. Today, utilities are preparing to build a new generation of nuclear plants based on standardized designs that will make construction easier and cheaper than in the past. Altogether, there is a realistic potential for a doubling of nuclear power capacity in the United States.

It is encouraging that both Barack Obama and John McCain recognize the importance of shaping new energy policies for the future. Only by expanding American energy supplies, combined with improvements in energy efficiency, can we put the nation on a path toward a stronger economy and greater security.

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