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Energy dependence can end in U.S.

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The U.S. cost of living is rising. Much of this increase has been driven by escalation in the price of oil and natural gas. As I see it, a non-existent U.S. energy policy is responsible for both problems.

A comprehensive policy is essential. It is going to take a combination of conservation, greater production of dependable energy resources and commonsense to do it.

The idea that conservation could fuel economic growth might have seemed improbable at one time. But it no longer does.

For the last 20 years or so, energy use in California has been flat, but the state's economy has continued to expand. California has used incentives to help reduce the waste in energy use and develop more energy-efficient technologies.

Time-of-day pricing to cut peak demand for electricity, energy audits and tax incentives for better insulation and more efficient heating/cooling systems are examples the Midwest should emulate.

The full benefits of advanced automotive technologies won't be realized until plug-in electric vehicles begin to make a dent in the market.

If energy for recharging batteries is provided by clean nuclear-generated electricity, the economic and environmental benefits would be huge.

We need to boost production of our principal energy sources. A necessary part of the solution is to open up untapped U.S. oil and natural gas deposits for production, increase use of nuclear power and foster development of clean-coal technologies.

This is where Congress needs to take action.

U.S. agencies estimate 116 billion barrels of oil and 651 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lie beneath federal lands and coastal waters. That is enough to help meet U.S. energy needs for decades. Even larger amounts of oil shale exist in the Western states. But Congress has yet to expand access to these resources.

A group of 10 senators recently proposed access to federal oil and gas resources that is too limited in scope.

Although their plan would expand access in 85 percent of the Outer Continental Shelf that remains closed to oil and gas production, it limits any expansion to the eastern Gulf of Mexico and waters off four Atlantic Coast states in the South. Under the plan, oil and gas in the North Atlantic and Pacific Coast would remain off-limits, as would substantial resources in Alaska.

Nor can we afford to turn our back on coal and nuclear power. Solar and wind combined account for less than 3 percent of U.S. electricity production.

New advances in clean-coal technology are on the horizon. It would be folly for Congress to force the regulation of carbon dioxide emissions from coal plants before technology has been developed to capture and store such emissions.

If Congress requires companies to adopt a fraudulent cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions, the cost of electricity from coal plants would soar, forcing many utilities to switch to high-priced natural gas.

For energy diversity and security, we need more nuclear power. Nuclear safety and reliability have increased significantly over the past two decades. Nuclear plants in Illinois are running more than 90 percent of the time, producing more electricity than ever.

Considering that our country is spending \$700 billion a year on imported oil, it would be foolish not to make maximum use of all U.S. energy resources.

With advanced technologies, energy conservation and improvements in energy efficiency, the United States could move within reach of total energy independence.

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