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America's future could be — should be — tied to clean-coal technology

By Stanford L. Levin

Sky-high oil prices. Painfully high gasoline prices. Potentially horrendous home heating bills this coming winter. Energy shortages. Dependence on foreign oil. There's lots of bad news about energy these days. It's fashionable to refer to an energy crisis, and everyone is looking for a solution.

Let's look underground. We have vast quantities of coal in this country. This could give us energy security and ease worries about running out of oil and gas, not to mention pushing down oil and gas prices as we use more coal and less oil. What we need to make this happen is more research in clean-coal technology. We need improved technology to burn coal more cleanly and efficiently and to capture and store carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas that results, so as to not contribute to global warming.

The industry has been spending money to develop better coal technology over the past years, but making the burning of coal truly clean will require some research support from the government.

Why can't the industry just do it? Because research to develop clean-coal technology is expensive, and it requires more money than any one company can commit. Furthermore, if one company were successful in developing better technology, it might be difficult for the company to recover its investment in its research, even though that research is important to the country.

The government supports all sorts of basic scientific research for similar reasons, and government-supported research into clean-coal technology should be a national priority of great importance.

Closer to home, the next administration should restore funding for FutureGen in Mattoon, Ill. Among other things, this public-private project, a joint effort between the Department of Energy and a consortium of coal companies, would develop and demonstrate carbon-capture and carbon-storage technology so that coal can be burned in an environmentally friendly manner.

Would this be expensive? Yes, but we have little choice. Such clean-coal technology must be central to a realistic, achievable policy of energy security and independence.

Coal primarily is useful for generating electricity, and electricity will become even more important in the future. For example, one of the solutions to our dependence on foreign oil is to use electric vehicles. But where will this electricity come from? Coal is a likely source, but we need environmentally friendly generation of electricity from coal.

Alternative energy sources, such as wind, solar and other types of generation, certainly will play a part in generating electricity, but it is difficult to see how our demand for electricity will be met without a substantially increased reliance on coal if we are to cut our dependence on imported oil. If we can increase our generation of electricity using clean-coal technology and reduce our use of oil, one result should be lower oil prices at the same time that we improve the environment through better coal technology.

I don't particularly like sending a lot of money to Middle East oil countries, to Venezuela and to certain other oil-producing countries. I'd rather spend my money on electricity generated from domestic coal. There would be a triple benefit when such a policy resulted in greater energy independence, reduced greenhouse gases and lower oil and gasoline prices.

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