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Cruel deception: White House killing of FutureGen is appalling

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For years, FutureGen has been offered up as the answer to tough questions facing the Bush administration about power and pollution.

The concept for a cutting-edge, cleaner coal plant was mentioned frequently when the White House's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions was in doubt.

Just wait until FutureGen, energy officials would say.

And so we waited. Years passed while a private industry alliance was assembled, applications were submitted and possible sites were vetted. Finally, patience was rewarded in December with the announcement that the futuristic plant was headed to Mattoon, Ill.

But now, only six weeks later, the Department of Energy has unexpectedly and unceremoniously killed FutureGen.

Illinois leaders rightly called this a cruel deception. More important, it's a crippling blow for those who understand the urgent need to develop cleaner energy technologies.

FutureGen provided the Bush administration with political cover as pressure to address environmental issues increased. Now, with this term winding down, the Department of Energy has pulled the plug.

Up until the end, administration officials had touted the project as a "centerpiece" of its efforts to develop more advanced coal technologies. And during last week's State of the Union address, President Bush pressed for cleaner coal.

Within 48 hours, Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman was blaming cost overruns for FutureGen's demise and announcing a pared-down plan to pay for equipment that captures and stores carbon dioxide emissions at several commercial coal plants.

If there is good news to be found here, it is that Texas should be a strong contender to host one of these carbon dioxide sites. The Texas towns of Jewett and Odessa were among the four finalists for FutureGen.

But that is a distant prospect.

Last week's announcement effectively kicked this years-long effort a few more years down the road. Whether the 44th president will revive FutureGen in any form is unknown. But last week's

decision made one thing clear: This White House can lay no claim to advancing efforts for cleaner energy.