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Our View: Bill in Congress would benefit FutureGen project

The United States bridges an estimated 4 trillion tons of coal. According to the World Energy Conference, America's coal reserves amount to roughly 28 percent of the world's total recoverable coal.

Illinois' coal reserve base is the second largest in the nation. The Illinois State Geological Survey says the state's coal resources hold more British thermal units than all of Kuwait's and Saudi Arabia's oil reserves combined.

So, why does the U.S. depend on importing much of its oil when she is so rich in coal?

The simple answer is carbon dioxide. When you burn coal, you send a lot of the stuff skyward.

The key to converting coal into liquid fuel is finding a way to capture and store carbon dioxide instead of churning the greenhouse gas into the atmosphere.

Proponents say converting coal to a liquid fuel is economically and commercially feasible when the global price of crude oil is at least \$40 a barrel.

These days watching the gas pump is like watching a slot machine. Gasoline prices have climbed sharply as the price of a barrel of imported oil has soared.

Monday, a Bush administration official predicted the use of clean-coal technology to capture and store carbon dioxide, instead of releasing it into the atmosphere will not be widespread until 2045.

A date that sounds far, far away to the average person desirous of having alternative — and cheaper — fuels.

The official pointed out the technology for storing captured carbon dioxide will be available by 2012. That date coincides with the projected start-up of the first FutureGen facility.

Mattoon and Tuscola, plus Odessa and Jewett in Texas, are seeking the state-of-the-art power plant. It will produce up to 1,300 construction jobs over the next few years and 150 or more permanent jobs.

FutureGen has partnered with the U.S. Department of Energy for developing new uses of coal.

Emissions from the process will be pumped more than 7,000 feet below ground in the form of liquid carbon dioxide.

The first FutureGen could become a magnet for many other energy-related facilities, much like Silicon Valley became a draw for development in the computer and technology fields in California.

If Mattoon or Tuscola wins the competition for the FutureGen site in August, it will be a coup of tremendous importance. This is a cutting-edge technology project that will produce a myriad of benefits for the area.

If successful, the FutureGen technology will wipe out concerns that eliminate much coal from industrial use in the United States.

A bill is being pushed in Congress to encourage the development of liquid fuel from coal.

The bipartisan legislation would authorize the Energy Department to set ceiling and floor prices for crude oil. If the global market exceeds the ceiling, the petroleum industry would contribute the difference to a federal trust fund.

Only coal-to-liquid fuel plants like FutureGen that use the carbon capture and storage process would be permitted to tap into the trust fund.

Robert Finley, director of the Center for Energy and Earth Resources for the Illinois Geology Survey, has stated, "With the success of FutureGen, coal production will increase in this country. And the use of coal will be maintained for the rest of this century."

FutureGen here, combined with Illinois' vast coal resources, is a prescription for growth for the area, whether it is located in Mattoon or Tuscola.

And it will move this nation one step closer to energy independence.

We hope it's sooner than 2045.