



If We Work Together, Coal Can be King Again

October 27, 2007

Some people in our region may still believe the future of Illinois coal is bleak.

After all, coal was king for decades here. More than 30,000 people took home some of the best wages offered in Southern Illinois through various coal-mining operations.

But thanks to the Clean Air Act, which almost had put the death knell on our region's sulfur-rich coal, mining operations dwindled since the early 1990s and the jobs that went with them disappeared. Fewer than 4,000 coal-mining jobs now exist in our region.

But thanks to John Mead and the folks at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Coal Research Center, there is reason for more than just optimism.

Mead's operation is at the forefront of coal technology research, and it already has paid dividends.

Technology that will allow uses for not only high-sulfur coal directly, but its by-products, has advanced to the point that we stand at the cusp of major breakthroughs.

Protecting our environment is critical, but with the research SIUC and other institutions are pursuing, the massive supply of bituminous coal right here in Southern Illinois could put a serious dent in our country's thirst for energy and the sources that could provide it.

Another \$1 million worth of research grants were recently awarded to various SIUC faculty members who will study various elements related to extracting and using coal, as well as using its byproducts.

We have no hesitation in our tax dollars being used for this purpose because we firmly believe this research will lead to advancements that will allow for our high-sulfur supply to once again make "our" coal the king.

Why?

Two cities in our state, Mattoon and Tuscola, are serious contenders against two others in Texas to win the rights to house the \$1.5 billion FutureGen power generating facility.

As proposed, the facility could burn high-sulfur coal, store carbon dioxide emissions underground, and produce hydrogen in great supply as a fuel source. Illinois is in the

running for FutureGen in part because of its huge reserves of coal, as well as the research that's been ongoing for years here at SIUC as well as at the University of Illinois.

Just in the past five years alone, Mead said SIUC has received \$19.3 million in outside financial support for coal research and development projects right here in Southern Illinois.

We see no reason to stop now. The reality of coal is that we now are in a window of opportunity. The nation needs reliable, home-grown sources of energy and our region is grounded by a supply of coal thought to hold more BTUs than the oil reserves of both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

As we said in an earlier opinion encouraging progress on coal gasification, coal is not the long-term solution for our nation's over-dependence on foreign oil. It has excellent potential for perhaps 100 years, more or less.

Let's use our time and great resource wisely. We now have the capability to use coal cleanly and effectively as an energy source. Let's make it happen now - and buy some time for scientists who will unlock the secrets of future sources of energy.