



FutureGen project deserves a home in Illinois

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In less than a month, we'll know if a site in Illinois will be the home for the FutureGen project.

The project holds great potential for our state, both in the immediate construction jobs and soon-to-follow research and development work and spin-off potential. There also is long-term potential for an economic boom in the under-used coal fields of Southern Illinois. That means more high-paying jobs, spendable income and economic development across the region.

Why? FutureGen is seen as a coal gasification project that would lead to the development of a new and growing market for bituminous coal, a wonderful source of energy that ran afoul of clean air legislation.

Two central Illinois communities - Tuscola and Mattoon - are among four communities that are finalists for the FutureGen site. The Texas communities of Jewett and Odessa also are in the running for the prototype plant. A successful project might yield billions, proponents say, and lead to a new breed of power plant construction projects.

FutureGen has been described as a top example of coal gasification's potential. It would curtail emissions by using gasification and emission-capture methods to pump waste carbon dioxide into underground storage areas - instead of releasing it into the air. It would create hydrogen for other uses while generating electrical power for as many as 150,000 homes.

FutureGen also could create a demand for our region's energy-laden coal reserves, which hold more BTUs than the oil reserves of both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It would make sense to have the FutureGen development close to the source of the fuel and in proximity to other Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic states that would like to put all their miners back to work.

There are several reasons to believe an Illinois site will be picked for the project by the FutureGen Alliance.

Illinois has the right geology for the FutureGen technology, Texas does not. The Mattoon site would allow the underground storage of emissions adjacent to the site. The Tuscola site would require just 10 miles of piping to a geologically suitable location.

Illinois is centrally located in the nation and offers unmatched highway, rail, water and air transportation. As a source state for the fuel, costs will be lower and less energy will be expended in transporting the coal from the mines to the site.

Illinois is in good company in seeking the FutureGen site. Our state's bid for the project is supported by the states of Indiana, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wyoming. Illinois and its newly-declared coal allies account for two-thirds of the nation's coal supply and one-third of coal-fired energy production. Other states are likely to join in the effort in the coming days.

Illinois already is on the cutting edge of coal research and development with the brain power of Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Eastern Illinois University, and nearby location of Purdue University.

We like our chances of getting the project. In fact, if this was a game of five-card poker, we'd be sitting on a full house. Texas might still be trying to fill an inside straight. But this isn't poker and it better not be politics, either.

Texas is the home state of President Bush, who may be near the end of his second term, but still is a formidable foe in any political endeavor.

Let's hope politics plays less of a role in this decision than science and technology. If the game is played by the rules, Illinois will claim the jackpot.