Back to the FutureGen

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In his State of the Union speech Monday, President George W. Bush urged Congress to "fund new technologies that can generate coal power while capturing carbon emissions."

It's a familiar theme for Bush. He's been touting so-called "FutureGen" clean coal technology since 2003. Last month, an industry group announced it would build a $1.75 billion plant to demonstrate that technology in Mattoon, Ill., hard by the southern Illinois coal fields.

Apparently, Samuel W. Bodman, Bush's energy secretary, missed that part of the president's speech. On Wednesday, Bodman said he's planning to drop support for the plant. The federal government had committed to pay 74 percent of the cost, with the remaining 26 percent coming from a coalition of coal and energy companies.

An Energy Department spokeswoman told Post-Dispatch Washington reporter Deirdre Shesgreen that Bodman's concerns about the plant's escalating price tag led him to reassess the project - although industry groups promised earlier this month to pick up the tab for any cost overruns.

Fortunately, Bodman will not have the final word on FutureGen, nor will the Bush administration. Construction at the Mattoon site was not expected to begin until 2010, when the current administration will be out of office. If a Democrat succeeds Bush, the environmental policies are likely to shift drastically. If it's a Democrat from Illinois - say, for example, Sen. Barack Obama - Mattoon's chances are even better.

FutureGen is crucial to America's energy needs. It promises a way to increase use our most abundant energy resource without adding damaging greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere.

More than half of the nation's electricity already is generated by burning coal, much of it in aging plants that will need replacement soon. Those plants dump thousands of tons of carbon dioxide into the air every day. Worldwide greenhouse gas emissions increased 70 percent between 1970 and 2004. The world faces an increasingly dangerous future unless those emissions can be curbed.

FutureGen relies on a new process to transform coal into a kind of synthetic natural gas. Along the way, carbon dioxide that would have been sent up the smokestack would be captured and stored underground.

The Bush administration spent the past seven years dragging its feet on global warming. But limits on carbon

emissions are inevitable. A bill already introduced in the Senate would impose a national cap-and-trade system. Democratic presidential candidates have promised drastic reductions that cannot be achieved without a proven way to capture and store carbon dioxide. At the Mattoon plant, it would be stored in underground salt caves.

Without technologies such as FutureGen, the nation's energy choices are severely limited and energy independence becomes far more problematic.

Fortunately, Congress controls federal spending, and Illinois' powerful congressional caucus has promised to fight for the Mattoon project. The government's industrial partners on the project worry that further delays will add to FutureGen's cost. They're promising to continue moving ahead with the Mattoon plant, at least for now.

The time for talk about clean coal technology has long since passed. Congress should listen to Bush's call to action, not to the nervous reservations of his energy secretary.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch â€“ CNS.

Back to the FutureGen by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch