

Burning promises

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

New technology promises to unlock the potential of coal, America's most abundant energy resource, to generate electricity without releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

But until that new technology is commercially proven, that's what it always will remain: a promise dangling forever just out of reach.

FutureGen, in Mattoon, Ill., was supposed to be the proving ground. It would have married decades-old methods of turning coal into gas with cutting-edge technology to capture and store carbon dioxide deep underground.

But last week, the Bush administration pulled the plug. U.S. Energy Secretary Samuel W. Bodman said FutureGen would have been a bad bet for taxpayers. "Innovations in technology and changes in the marketplace have created other viable options," Bodman wrote in a letter published in Wednesday's Post-Dispatch. "That diminished the need for a demonstration project."

That's not quite the way private industry sees it. In fact, with electric demand continuing to rise and emission caps on the horizon, economists already worry that energy costs will squeeze future economic growth.

This week, a group of leading investment banks adopted tough new lending standards for borrowers who want to build new coal-fired power plants. That's causing utility executives to turn their attention to natural gas.

But forecasters say supplies of natural gas will decline or remain flat in coming years. Electricity produced by burning natural gas already is significantly more expensive than that from coal or nuclear plants. Part of the higher cost stems from increased demand that occurred when a spate of new natural gas power plants were built in the 1990s.

FutureGen could have eased some of that crunch. Because it was to be built in Mattoon, near the Illinois coal fields and above giant salt caverns that were perfect for storing captured carbon dioxide, it was uniquely situated to prove the new technology.

Given the long lead time necessary to get ideas off the drawing board and into the field, and the need to act now to curtail the most damaging effects of global warming, it makes no sense to throw in the towel at this

point.

But ever since Mattoon was selected over two Texas cities for FutureGen, rumors have swirled that the Bush administration would pull the plug. When it happened, a headline in the Dallas Morning News proclaimed: "Texas back in the game for clean coal."

It may be that political considerations and the desire to deliver an expensive federal project to the president's home state trump all the careful planning that already had gone into FutureGen.

Or perhaps the project was just a fig leaf for an administration that repeatedly denied the reality of global warming, an administration whose environmental and energy problems have left the nation in a serious mess.

But five years later, the promise of clean coal technology remains just out of reach. America is the poorer for it. We can't burn promises to heat our homes.

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