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EDITORIAL

The Coal Trap

There is a rule for judging solutions to the twin problems of energy dependence and global warming: A policy designed to solve one problem should not make the other worse. But that is a likely outcome of the many “energy independence” bills circulating in Congress that aim to build a whole new generation of coal-to-liquid plants to convert coal into automotive fuel.

These bills have already acquired an enthusiastic constituency and will be offered as amendments to what is now a relatively simple and sound energy bill designed to increase the fuel efficiency of cars and light trucks, encourage the production of biofuels and provide research and development money for the capture and storage of carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

There are, of course, ways to make this bill better. Senator Jeff Bingaman will offer a useful amendment to require utilities to generate a percentage of their electricity from renewable sources like wind. But there are also ways to make the bill a lot worse. One of them is to require the expenditure of billions of dollars in loans, tax incentives and price guarantees to lock in a technology that could end up doing more harm than good.

Coal is far and away America’s most abundant fuel. It provides more than half the country’s electricity. And there is no doubt that it could substitute for foreign oil, although how much and at what price is not clear. In addition, the technology to convert coal into liquid fuels is well established. But it is also true that between the production process and burning it in cars, coal-to-liquid fuel produces more than twice the greenhouse gas emissions as gasoline and nearly twice the emissions of ordinary diesel. These are terrible ratios.

Congressional and industry proponents of coal-to-liquid plants argue that the same technologies that may someday capture and store emissions from coal-fired plants will also be available to coal-to-liquid plants. But that deals with only half of the problem. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, coal-based automobile fuel would still be marginally dirtier than ordinary gasoline and only marginally cleaner than conventional diesel.

What this means is that the country would be investing billions to produce fuels that, from a global warming perspective, leave us at best treading water. That is unacceptable at a time when mainstream scientists are warning that greenhouse gases must be cut by 60 percent or better over the next half-century to avert the worst consequences of global warming.

Researchers at M.I.T. estimate that it will cost \$70 billion to build enough coal-to-liquid plants to replace 10 percent of American gasoline consumption. A similar investment in biofuels like cellulosic or sugar-based ethanol — which could yield substantial reductions in greenhouse gases — would seem a lot smarter.

Given the dimensions of our energy problems, new ideas must be explored. But it makes little sense to shackle the country now to a coal-based technology of such uncertain promise.

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