

Wyo. climate change efforts stymied by Washington

By: Matthew Brown, The Associated Press
10/8/2007

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As one of the largest energy producers in the nation, Wyoming is no stranger to the debate over global warming.

With a Democratic governor who embraces energy development even as he advocates for emerging clean-coal technologies, the state has tried to address climate change head-on — without swerving from its energy-dependent economy.

Yet those efforts, including a \$3 billion clean-coal project, have been sidelined at the federal level and left the state's leaders frustrated. With no clear indication of the federal government's direction on climate change, Wyoming is finding it difficult to strike out on its own.

"They've got to decide if they're serious about this," Gov. Dave Freudenthal said in a recent telephone interview. "An awful lot of people are prepared to unleash an awful lot of creativity to make all of this work, but they've got to have some signals about what the policies are going to be."

A federal energy bill approved in 2005 appeared to launch a close energy alliance between Wyoming and the federal government. The bill included a congressional commitment to an advanced coal-fired power plant near Rock Springs with the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without cutting into Wyoming's production of 430 million tons of coal annually.

But Congress has failed to follow through on promised subsidies for the plant. And last month came indications that Wyoming's struggles to land funding could get even tougher, when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced his opposition to three coal-fueled power plants proposed in his home state of Nevada.

Reid's spokesman Jon Summers said the senator has no intention of getting involved in similar proposals in other states. But Summers added that Reid's antipathy toward coal extends beyond Nevada — and is not limited to conventional plants.



From left, Govs. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Dave Freudenthal of Wyoming, Jon Huntsman of Utah, and Bill Ritter of Colorado attend a news conference at Freudenthal's residence in Cheyenne, Wyo., Thursday, Sept. 13, 2007, to discuss incentives for clean energy research and development. (Photo: Brandon Qvester/AP)

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"Senator Reid's position is there is no such thing as clean coal," Summers said.

Freudenthal said Wyoming has acted independently where it can: devoting \$17 million to a new School of Energy Resources at the University of Wyoming; spending \$2.5 million on clean coal technologies; and setting aside \$5 million to develop ways to use carbon dioxide to enhance oil recovery.

Yet that pales in comparison to the cost of a single coal gasification plant, which can exceed \$1 billion depending on size. Meanwhile, the private market has been reluctant to invest in such power projects until the technology is commercially proven.

Among his constituents, Freudenthal is walking a fine line advocating for less polluting technologies as his state undergoes a boom in energy exploration. Wyoming produces more coal than any other state and is among the top ten in both oil and gas production.

Environmental groups frequently attack Wyoming's pro-energy policies as marring the state's landscape and depleting scarce water supplies. But Harold Bergman, director of the University of Wyoming's School of Environment and Natural Resources, said Freudenthal deserved credit for "rattling a lot of cages" on the broader issue of climate change.

Freudenthal said coal's role in providing more than half the nation's electricity is irreplaceable. Rather than reducing its use, he said, new technologies need to be cultivated to lessen coal's environmental harm.

"The life that both Americans and others across the world want to have is based on energy," he said.

The argument that coal will remain vital — wind power and other renewable energies notwithstanding — is expected to be a central theme in Freudenthal's keynote address at a climate conference set to begin Monday in Jackson.

David Siever, an energy investment specialist for Connecticut-based Capital Technology, Inc., said the governor's view is shared by other coal-producers including Montana, Illinois and several Appalachian states.

Freudenthal has sought to bring in non-coal states, too. In April, he signed an agreement with California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger under which the two states pledged to collaborate on clean coal technologies.

California, which depends heavily on high-cost natural gas power plants, is eager to tap into Wyoming's vast supplies of cheaper coal. But California law mandates long-term power contracts must be with "clean" energy providers, meaning Wyoming first would have to build new plants like the stalled Rock Springs facility.

That proposal calls for a 500-megawatt coal gasification plant built by the utility company PacifiCorp in partnership with the Wyoming Infrastructure Authority. It would transform coal into a gas that would be burned to generate electricity. Carbon dioxide produced during the process would be captured and stored underground, neutralizing its contribution to climate change.

But because of the high price tag, the plant will not move forward without the federal government picking up a significant share of the cost, said PacifiCorp spokesman David Eskelsen. A \$50 million federal down payment, sought by the late U.S. Senator Craig Thomas of Wyoming, was stripped out of the Department of Energy's 2008 budget by Congress.

The number of similar power plants planned nationwide has grown sharply, from 19 coal gasification proposals in January 2006, to 34 proposed as of May 2007.

Only two of the plants exist in the U.S. Both were heavily subsidized.

Energy Department spokesman William Purvis said a \$2 billion federal loan guarantee program could "prime the pump" and accelerate construction. More than 140 loan applications had been filed before the program was even finalized, for loan requests totaling more than \$27 billion.

Analysts say many of the companies and utilities proposing the plants are waiting for Congress to provide more funding and to settle on a national carbon regulation

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program. Until then, states like Wyoming are unlikely to make much progress on their own, said Michael Shellenberger, managing director of American Enviroics, an Oakland-based research organization.

"When you have the governor of a coal state doing a lot of lobbying for it, it's all perceived as pork spending in Washington," he said. "You've got to find a way to nationalize the commitment."

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