

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Toward renewable energy resources

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As the war on terrorism creeps forward, America's dependence on foreign oil has become the nation's Achilles' Heel.

In order to strengthen this national vulnerability, President Bush has said that America must become self-reliant. That means finding new sources of oil, seeking out alternate energy sources and, to a lesser extent, promoting the use of more fuel-efficient vehicles and conserving gasoline.

The focus of the president's energy policy is aimed at opening the pristine Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration. The Senate will soon vote on whether to begin drilling in this "land of the caribou," as it is known to the indigenous peoples of Alaska.

While oil reserves are known to exist beneath the ANWR, the amount of oil is negligible given the amount of fuel Americans consume. It is estimated that the oil would serve the current needs of America for less than five years. In fact, the United States contains only about 3 percent of the world's known oil reserves.

If the Senate were to vote on drilling in the ANWR today, the plan would be Dead on arrival.

With that in mind, senators last week began debating America's energy plan for the future. One of the benefits to spring from those discussions was legislation covering gasoline additives that will boost gas reserves and improve air quality.

Senators on Friday agreed to triple the amount of ethanol used in gasoline. At the same time, they voted to phase out MTBE -- a gas additive that boosts mileage but has been shown to pollute water supplies.

Ethanol is ethyl alcohol that can be used either as a fuel by itself or mixed with gasoline to form "gasohol." More than 1 billion gallons of ethanol are blended with gasoline every year. Because the ethanol molecule contains oxygen, it allows internal combustion engines to burn the fuel more completely, which reduces emissions.

And because ethanol is derived from plants -- primarily corn -- it is seen as a renewable resource.

The American Coalition for Ethanol has been lobbying hard for legislation that would establish renewable fuels standards (RFS) for the nation. Last week's agreement would seem to buttress that group's contention that March 2002 could turn out to be "one of the most important months in the history of the ethanol industry."

But even implementation of a renewable fuel standard will not reverse this nation's gas-guzzling ways. Congress must pass legislation to boost the production of electricity from clean resources such as wind and solar power as well as biomass and geothermal sources. And Congress should require the automobile industry to hike fuel economy (CAFE) standards for cars and trucks.

Alternative power sources such as hydrogen fuel-cell-powered vehicles must also be fine tuned.

The technology exists to make America less dependent on foreign sources of oil and to provide cleaner power sources. What is required now is the political will to see it through.

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