

Bridging the Gap to Energy's Future

By Don Brunell

Washington's economy was built on abundant low cost energy. It offsets many other higher costs of doing business in our state and creates the family-wage jobs with good benefits we enjoy.

Today, our electricity, oil, natural gas and coal are not as plentiful. It is not as much as they are scarce; it is our governmental policies restrict access to them. Therefore, we rely more on foreign suppliers. Consequently, we face \$5 a gallon gas, \$6 diesel and rapidly escalating electric and heating and air conditioning bills.

There is no question about our need to conserve energy and develop new sources. Conservation, which means wise use not prohibition, must be engrained in our culture.

The problem is politicians today are trying to sell the voters a panacea. They fail to address what it takes to convert to wind, solar, biomass and geothermal. It is not simple. It will not occur overnight and it is not risk free.

There is No Utopia

Sorry folks, there is no utopia.

For example, have politicians thought about how to replace the millions of daily plastic and rubber products we depend upon which are made from crude oil. These products aren't just water bottles, but thousands of medical devices which keep our hospitals sterile and safe for patients.

Armies of political advisors want their candidates to focus on the 30-second sound bites chastising "big oil" or denouncing offshore drilling. They may poll well and give voters an outlet to vent their anger and frustration. That rhetoric doesn't solve our nation's competitiveness problems. It makes our problems worse

Do our politicians really think that banning offshore oil exploration is going to stop Chinese from drilling off Florida? When Congress stops drilling along our coastline, the Cubans who lease to the Chinese smile all the way to the bank and motorists get hosed at the pump.

If energy independence is the political goal, why ban drilling? Have they considered how much oil and gas is available out there to wean us from foreign sources? You won't hear them say that even though in 2005 Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed 109 oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico, no one lost their lives and there were no major oil spills.

On shore, America has a supply of recoverable oil and natural gas which can be economically extracted today. For example, in eastern Montana and North Dakota, the Bakken Formation promises to produce as crude and gas as Alaska's North Slope. Think about combining that production with that from ANWR and we could really have energy independence.

Clean Coal Technology is Needed

Do they think by stopping research on clean coal technology is stop the Chinese from building polluting coal plants?

Why not develop the technology for clean burning coal and sell it to our competitors rather than hide our heads in the sand and pretend coal will not be part of our energy future? Even if we bring all of the new wind, solar and alternative energy on line in the United States, by 2030 more than half of our power will come from coal.

Do they consider that removing the four lower Snake River dams cuts our supply of "non-greenhouse" electricity supply, cripples irrigated agriculture and puts thousands of additional trucks on the highway to move farm and forest products from Lewiston to Portland?

If reducing our "carbon footprint" and keeping our economy, homes, school and hospitals supplied with electricity is their top priority, why aren't they talking about nuclear power plants? Remember, we have one operating safely at Hanford and another one about 80 percent complete. The industry has come a long ways since Three-Mile Island and the French have the technology to reprocess spent uranium fuel rods.

So as the elections gear up, ask those running for office for solutions, not grand promises or catchy punch lines. As a nation and state we are in jeopardy if we don't have adequate energy at affordable prices. That is a legacy we should not leave our grandchildren.

This is an unabridged copy of article by Don Brunell, President of the Association of Washington Business (AWB). AWB has over 6,700 members who provide jobs for more than 600,000 Washington residents. While the article was written for AWB's audience in Washington, it hits on issues of interest to the Northwest as a whole. RiverPartners thanks Mr. Brunell for his permission to condense and reprint the article for our Current Reflections newsletter.

