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Editorial: Bring FutureGen to Illinois

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Coal is plentiful in the U.S. and downright cheap as an energy source compared to just about everything else. That's why it's still used to produce half the nation's electrical power. That share may decline in the future as nuclear or other alternative sources of electricity -- solar, wind, hydro -- grow. But coal still will be a significant source of electricity for years to come.

Unfortunately, it's also dirty. It releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere when it's burned, creating heat-trapping greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

The challenge is to transform coal into an environmentally friendly power source. Enter the FutureGen Industrial Alliance, a venture of the U.S. Department of Energy and a nonprofit consortium of coal producers and energy generators.

FutureGen plans to build the cleanest fossil fuel-fired plant in the world -- a \$1.45 billion power plant that will transform coal to gas for use in hydrogen fuel cells, all while it captures and stores carbon dioxide deep underground. The plant will produce 275 megawatts of power, enough electricity to power 150,000 homes, with virtually zero emissions.

It will be the first plant in the world to fully integrate all those features. If FutureGen succeeds, it will provide a model for clean coal technology, carbon dioxide storing and hydrogen production on a commercial scale that could then be replicated elsewhere in the U.S. and the world.

The big unknown is where it will be built. The competition for this coveted prototype plant has been fierce over the last four years. Now, just like the battle 20 years ago for the superconducting super collider, it has come down to Illinois or Texas. Two central Illinois towns, Mattoon and Tuscola, are on the short list, as are two towns in Texas, Jewett and Odessa.

Only one can win.

So why should it be a town in Illinois?

Because as oil is to Texas, coal is to Illinois. This state has a rich coal belt, and Mattoon and Tuscola are right in the midst of it.

Illinois has 38 billion tons of recoverable coal reserves, among the largest in the nation, and a long track record of investing in clean coal technology. It also has plenty of water -- critical to a plant that will require 2,500 gallons of water per minute -- and deep sandstone reservoirs that are well-suited for underground storage of carbon dioxide.

Illinois' coal region is at the center of an extensive rail network, which will reduce transportation costs for the project.

Central Illinois is perfectly situated to serve as the "living laboratory" that FutureGen envisions. The whole point of this project is to demonstrate that the technology is commercially feasible and provide a model for other clean-coal plants. That points to another advantage for Illinois: It shares geological features with states that are likely to build similar plants. Texas does not. That's one reason why Wyoming -- the nation's largest coal-producing state -- Kentucky, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Wisconsin back Illinois' bid over Texas.

Texas argues that it has the necessary expertise because pumping carbon dioxide underground has long been used there as a way to force oil and gas to the surface. But that illustrates the differences between the two states. Illinois is a coal state that will capitalize on this clean-coal technology -- not just use this as an adjunct to benefit Texas oil and gas production.

Illinois has agreed to provide about \$80 million in grants, low-interest loans and tax breaks to lure FutureGen. It has agreed to assume liability for damage from underground storage leaks. All that amounts to some risk, but it's a wise risk for a project that holds enormous promise for the future of the Illinois coal industry.

When Waxahachie, Texas, beat out Batavia's Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory for the super collider in 1988, it did not end well for Texas or the nation. The project was junked five years later due to massive cost overruns, mismanagement and loss of political support. Now Europe is home to the world's largest super collider.

The U.S. can lead the world on clean coal technology. The future should start right here.