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Illinois sites are expected to clear key hurdle

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WASHINGTON -- Both Illinois sites competing for the world's cleanest coal-fired power plant are expected to clear a key environmental hurdle less than six months before a winner will be named, plant officials said this week.

The \$1-billion FutureGen project has been a hot topic in Washington this week. The project aims to turn coal into gas to produce electricity with almost no air pollution.

A House subcommittee put the project's central technologies under the microscope Tuesday morning, debating the utility of such a plant and its potential hazards - and if the attention on reducing carbon dioxide emissions is overblown.

A draft of an environmental impact study has been completed for each of the four finalists: the Illinois cities of Mattoon and Tuscola and two towns in Texas.

"We have not identified any 'show-stoppers' for any of the four sites," said Mike Mudd, chief executive of the FutureGen Alliance. "The (study) is basically yes or no. Right now, we think it's going to be 'yes.'"

The FutureGen effort partners the alliance's 12 members, including Peabody Energy Corp. in St. Louis, with the U.S. Department of Energy.

The plant would create 1,300 construction jobs. Once finished in 2012, the plant would employ 150 full-time workers and create at least 375 "spin-off" jobs, according to official estimates.

Mudd declined to say if one site had pulled ahead of the other as the preferred choice in the state.

One difference between the two states involved is that Texas, unlike Illinois, has passed a law that aims to assume liability for any problems as a result of the plant's techniques.

Today, an Illinois Senate committee will hold a hearing on a bill that includes Illinois' version of that idea, said Bill Hoback, who heads the Illinois Office of Coal Development.

A crowded House hearing Tuesday addressed the topics of carbon capture and sequestration, two techniques central to the FutureGen plant's operation. Those processes include depositing carbon dioxide thousands of feet into the Earth as if injecting it into a sponge.

Some congressmen questioned the project's timeline, and whether the carbon dioxide might contaminate underground water sources or seep up to the surface and re-enter the atmosphere.