

GREEN ENERGY IS GREAT, BUT WE MUST STILL DIG AND DRILL

By Terry Barnich

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President Bush is certainly taking his licks over his national energy plan, while Mayor Daley is being lionized for his new greenest-city-in America approach to energy development.

Some have accused Bush of overstating the case, and they maintain that we are merely facing a set of unconnected, temporary challenges. But given that the dictionary definition of a crisis is "a turning point in the course of anything" consider this: a recent poll taken by the nonpartisan Field Institute shows that that nearly 60% of Californians now support the construction of new nuclear power plants.

Could it be that California, so often a national trendsetter is out ahead of George Bush in focusing on the need to beef up in dramatic fashion America's energy supply mix?

I'm unaware of any similar polling data. But, it's probably fair to say that last summer's threat of brownouts in the Chicago area derailed popular sentiment to mothball Commonwealth Edison's inventory of nuclear power stations. Also, over the last two years Illinois' energy officials in government have forged ahead with plans to permit the construction of a wide variety of new supply sources.

America's appetite for energy continues to grow faster than our means to sate the hunger. Since 1950 our production of all energy sources have increased at about half the pace of consumption and in the last decade has actually flattened out. The good news is that much of this gap is due to greater energy efficiencies. But we also are burdened by a decade of incoherent regulations that alternately suppress the construction of power plants, gasoline refineries, oil wells and natural gas and petroleum pipelines.

Problem is limited supply, not excess demand.

Bush's plan is designed to reverse this drift. He has proposed a comprehensive set of programs and policies around the principle that the bulk of the Nation's energy needs must be met by encouraging the creation

of new energy supplies and the building of necessary infrastructure. It acknowledges what Californians already know: that our current power shortages and high gasoline prices are problems of supply not demand.

Critics of the President's plan oppose breathing new life into the supply side of the energy equation. They argue that the president's plan is an unnecessary sop to the traditional (read: bad) energy industries -- oil, gas, coal and nuclear-- at the expense of conservation and environmentally benign alternative or renewable energy (read: virtuous) sources -- wind, solar, biomass, geothermal. According to the critics we can conserve our way out of any supply shortage and to the extent we still need more BTUs to keep the air conditioning on, we can do it by installing more solar panels on our rooftops.

The advocates of the soft-path as it is often called have a tendency to understate the complexities of achieving this state of energy nirvana. It seems by yesterday's headlines that Mayor Daley's administration has now adopted this line by announcing a nearly all conservation policy to meet the City's anticipated energy needs.

Be green but be intelligent too.

Look, conservation and green power are great. I'm all for them. But, there's no way around the hard facts that for the foreseeable future we have to drill and dig and, yes, even nuke, as well as recycle if we're going to keep this economic engine running. It's nifty to build the most efficient house, but that doesn't mean you go out and tear down all the inefficient ones.

It is no more possible to shift the bulk of energy production to renewables than it is to suggest that by merely adding some more nail polish, a lady can do without clothes. As important as nail polish is to completing a look, it's at the margins – just like renewables. The idea that we can grow the economy while at the same time reducing our total energy consumption may find a ready audience in a nation in search of weight-reducing diets that allow us to eat as we please and to avoid exercise. But as the diets defy the laws of biology, the prescription of an inverse relationship between economic growth and energy consumption requires repeal of the laws of thermodynamics. Not even the Chicago City Council can do that.

There is no denying the remarkable improvement in energy efficiency America has achieved in the last 30 years. Since 1973 total output of goods and services in the U.S. has risen by 125%. Total energy use, by contrast, has risen in that same time frame by only 30%. To put it another way, in 1973 it took 4 units of energy to create 1 unit of gross domestic product; today it only takes 3 units of energy to do the same.

But the one lesson I would have hoped that Mayor Daley would have taken from California's ongoing experience with price spikes and blackouts is that even the most aggressive conservation policies can't supply the juice to keep all the lights on.