

FORUM

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EDITORIALS

Carbon Clampdown

A proposed coal-fired power plant could prove a trailblazer in capturing carbon dioxide emissions believed to contribute to global warming.

A coal-fired power plant proposed for West Texas represents the kind of innovative approach to energy and environmental issues that America increasingly needs to pursue.

The plant, costing more than \$3 billion, would be built nine miles east of Sweetwater in Nolan County, which already has become a hotbed of wind-power generation.

Here's what excites us

If the coal plant proposed by Nebraska-based Tenaska Inc. performs as planned, it would accomplish two notable feats:

■ It would capture 85 to 90 percent of emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), the principal greenhouse gas that scientists say contributes to global warming.

■ It would pipe the captured CO₂ to West Texas oilfields where it could significantly increase oil recovery from wells.

Revenue from the CO₂ sales would help offset the plant's high capital cost. The plant would generate about 600 megawatts of electricity for sale, an amount sufficient to power several hundred thousand homes.

Currently, no large commercial coal-fired power plants capture CO₂ emissions. Only some small pilot plants do.

If the Tenaska plant proves successful, it could become a model for retrofitting of numerous existing U.S. coal-fired power plants to enable them to capture large volumes of CO₂ emissions. Power plants are a major source of carbon emissions worldwide.

The development of cleaner coal-fired plants that can trap CO₂ emissions, coupled with stronger energy conservation programs, could help ensure that America has an ample, affordable and environmentally acceptable electricity supply in coming decades.

Not a done deal

We should caution that there are some very strong "ifs" about the plant proposed by Tenaska, a sizable energy company (about \$8.7 billion in annual revenues) with

headquarters in Omaha, Neb. The company operates a 100-employee regional office in Arlington and has considerable facilities in Texas, including natural gas-fired generating plants.

Tenaska officials, who met March 12 with the Star-Telegram Editorial Board, stress that they can't guarantee at this point that they will build the West Texas plant, which would cost considerably more than the typical pulverized-coal generating plant that lacks facilities to capture CO₂. The coal for the West Texas plant would be transported by train from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming.

With help from state and local tax breaks, Tenaska officials hope to obtain financing for the plant in the latter part of 2009 and have it generating electricity by 2014. In addition, federal legislation needs to be passed to provide financial incentives for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the company said. And even if the plant is built, there's no guarantee that its carbon-capturing facilities will work as well as hoped.

Tenaska also must obtain an air permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, but it won't require limitations on CO₂ emissions from the Sweetwater plant because neither the federal nor state government currently regulates carbon dioxide, TCEQ spokesman Terry Clawson said.

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Nevertheless, we're inclined to believe Tenaska officials when they say that they plan to capture the bulk of the plant's CO₂ emissions. Revenues from CO₂ sales to the oil patch could help appreciably in paying for the plant's operation.

"Tenaska contemplates that various agreements to build and operate the carbon-capture facilities will be in place prior to beginning construction of the facility," Greg Kunkel, a company vice president, said in an e-mail.

We need more Tenaskas on the energy and environmental fronts — companies willing to stick out their necks and stretch their pocketbooks to give America not only more energy but cleaner energy.