



Turn Out Those Lights: Part II Capitol Comments-Aug. 25

We cannot as a state or nation take solace in the recent declines of oil and gas prices. Most Americans know that \$4.00 gas could return quickly. We simply don't know when. If we are to maintain our status as a world power and economic juggernaut the energy problem must be brought to center stage. Long-term solutions cannot on longer be put off. What can and should be done to address this issue?

First, common sense tells us we should put everything on the table; conservation, green energy (wind, solar, ethanol, soy diesel, geothermal and atomic, etc.), and more "drilling." Each of these solutions is an essential part of getting us to a sane energy future.

Government can and should play a role, providing incentives where necessary and funding research and encouraging implementation of encouraging conservation measures and sustainable sources of energy.

But the real innovations will come from the private sector and those must be carefully vetted and encouraged.

For instance some will argue we jumped the gun a little in creating huge ethanol mandates and devoting so many tax dollars to corn-based ethanol subsidies. But significant investments in technology have allowed us to improve production while mitigating the environmental impact. We are squeezing more and more fuel from corn and using fewer resources to do it.

If Dupont is correct in suggesting we will have 400-bushel corn in a decade ethanol becomes an even more attractive fuel. If we walk away from corn based ethanol with that level of production, what will be the implications for grain farmers? Ethanol has great potential and it does have obvious drawbacks but let the research and support

continue.

A more pragmatic long-term approach maybe making ethanol from non-food plants; this solution is gaining steam, and that's a positive.

So is one of the great arguments between presidential candidates McCain and Obama, and at the risk of inserting national politics in a simple column by a mere state representative, I think Sen. McCain has a point. There is additional oil out in the Gulf of Mexico, and there's not much evidence that getting it would create environmental havoc. The same could be said for the California coast and even the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Additionally, we know America has more oil in shale than the Saudi's do under their considerable sand. Some suggest as much as a million barrels can be squeezed from an acre of shale without overturning any topsoil.

No one is arguing that the quest for new American oil should be full-steam-ahead with no concern for the natural environment. But no one so far has made the case that responsible oil drilling causes irreparable harm to even sensitive areas. Fresh American oil can give us the time we need to find the smarter solutions without destroying our economy. Other choices?

Wind energy is now a proven technology but one that needs further advances in electrical storage and transmission; we must continue to support it and encourage its use but realize that coal fired electrical plants are necessary in the near future to supply low cost energy while we improve wind technology. We still must have power when the wind doesn't blow on those 100 degree July days or those subzero January nights.

The potential of solar energy remains mostly that -- mere potential, and I sometimes find myself wondering if we're not ignoring one of our better opportunities. Solar was once the darling of the alternative energy forces, but its glamour seems to have faded in the face of both technological challenges and government action or inaction.

In recent months we have seen dramatic improvement in solar technology. It will be a part of the long-term solution.

Atomic power could and should provide a significant portion of this nations power in a relatively short period. It is cheap and clean and could be a major solution to present and future energy needs. It has been over 12 years since the last reactor was added to our power grid.

Government can and should provide incentives for clean and sustainable energy sources, but in the end it will depend on the genius of the free market, of entrepreneurs and scientists who recognize the rewards of cheaper and cleaner energy and who are willing to take the risks necessary to develop it.

Finally, I come to you and me. As we work our way through this problem -- the most serious we face aside from national security -- we must confront the fact that conservation is needed. Pump up the tires. Dust off the bicycle. Put thermal blankets in the attic. Learn to enjoy walking. And when it becomes time to replace the family vehicle, think long and hard about how badly we really need another 15-mpg assault vehicle.

It isn't a joyful thing to ponder, but it has the saving grace of being common sense. It is

the same common sense that tells us to use safely the oil and coal resources we have in this county while we develop the next generation of energy resources.

Four-dollar gas may be gone for the moment but it will be back with a vengeance unless we take this issue with the greatest possible concern.

The next session of the legislature is just over four months away, and I am going to ask you for a special favor. Please do some thinking about how Iowa government should be approaching the question of energy.

I want your input on this critical issue. The next session of the Iowa General Assembly begins in January of 2009. Let me know what you think can and should be done to move us past the energy conundrum we are now facing. Meanwhile, don't forget to turn off the lights.

Mike May

mmmay@longlines.com

mike.may@legis.state.ia.us