

Illinois towns could be 'clean' plant site

By Mike Dorning
and Bob Sexter
Tribune staff reporters

WASHINGTON—Two Illinois cities were among four sites chosen Tuesday as finalists for a \$1 billion federal initiative to build the world's first virtually pollution-free coal-fired electric power plant.

The cities of Mattoon and Tuscola are potential locations for the ambitious project, which seeks to transform the nation's abundant but air-fouling coal supply into a clean-burning fuel that could meet the country's energy needs for the next 250 years. The two other sites chosen are in Texas: Odessa and Jewett.

Along with tackling air pollution, the prototype plant seeks to address the problem of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming. The carbon dioxide produced by the plant will be captured, liquefied and pumped into geologic reservoirs deep below the ground.

If the pilot plant develops commercially viable technology, the project holds the promise of reviving southern Illinois' coal industry. Illinois coal burns especially efficiently, making the state's large deposits a potent source of energy. But Illinois coal also releases lots of sulfur when burned, and concerns about pollution have hurt demand for the coal, contributing to economic decline in southern Illinois.

Gasification

Instead of burning coal, the prototype plant would use a more energy-efficient and environmentally safer process called gasification. Coal is heated under pressure, setting off chemical reactions that produce gases. Some of the gases are used to turn turbines that produce electricity, and some of the constituent chemicals in the coal are recombined into synthetic fuels and compounds useful to industry.

The winning city, to be chosen by fall 2007, can expect a more



Mattoon Journal Gazette photo by Eric Hiltner

Mattoon City Commissioners Randy Ervin (center), Dave Schilling (left) and Joe McKenzie celebrate after receiving the news.

Coal contest

The winning prototype coal-fired plant will use "gasification" instead of burning coal to produce gases that will power turbines and create electricity more cleanly and efficiently. The finalists for the plant site are:

- Mattoon, Ill.
- Tuscola, Ill.
- Odessa, Texas
- Jewett, Texas

immediate economic gain: The project would require up to 1,300 jobs at the peak of construction. Upon completion, the plant would have a permanent workforce of up to 150.

The finalists were chosen from a dozen sites in seven states.

The matchup in the next phase reprises the competition during the late 1980s for the superconducting supercollider, a multibillion-dollar atom smasher for which the Department of Energy selected Texas as the site over Illinois' Fermilab shortly after Texan George H.W. Bush was elected to the White House. The project was later canceled.

Many critics accused the Energy Department of succumb-

ing to political influence in siting the supercollider, though officials denied the charge.

With a Texan once again in the White House, officials said they would make their selections based solely on science.

"There was absolutely no political influence that went into the final selection of the states," said Mike Mudd, chief executive officer of the FutureGen Alliance, the consortium of energy companies that is building the prototype plant in partnership with the Energy Department.

Taxpayers' part: \$730 million

The energy companies are contributing \$250 million toward the cost and federal taxpayers about \$730 million.

In Illinois, officials in the state administration and host communities were ecstatic.

"We're just tickled to death that we've made the next step," said Brian Moody, who runs Tuscola's economic development authority.

The two Illinois sites are just 25 miles apart and share many of the same geologic and infrastructure characteristics sought by FutureGen. Both are crisscrossed by freight rail lines, making it easy to bring in coal from all parts of the country to be tested. Thousands of feet below the surface of both



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communities is a saline aquifer, which the plant would use as a giant subterranean repository for the carbon dioxide it produces. The state has promised FutureGen an \$80 million package of grants, tax breaks and low-interest loans if Illinois lands the plant.

Even if one of the Texas sites is the winner, leaders in the Illinois towns are confident that making the short list will help lure other energy investment.

"They don't give hats and T-shirts till you get to the Final Four," said Alan Gilmore, the city administrator of Mattoon.

Tuesday's announcement also carries political benefits for Gov. Rod Blagojevich, whose reelection support is weakest in the southern coal region that would get a big economic shot in the arm if FutureGen's technology proves to be a success. FutureGen won't make a final site selection until well after the November election, but Blagojevich can be expected to point to Tuesday's announcement as an example of his economic development prowess.

Mike Dorning reported from Washington and Bob Sexter from Chicago.

mdorning@tribune.com
bsexter@tribune.com



Quinn Propst/The Regional

Drew Hoel, Tuscola city administrator, Brian Moody, director of Tuscola Economic Development Inc., Jim Crane, County Highway Engineer, Chuck Knox, County Board member and Tuscola Mayor Dan Kleiss were at the city building Tuesday afternoon to discuss the announcement that Tuscola is in the top four FutureGen sites.

FutureGen

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Drew Hoel. Whichever city becomes the final choice, it's likely to become a future boomtown. Some 1,300 construction jobs will need filling from 2007 to 2012, and another 150 permanent jobs will last for an estimated 30 years, if not 80-100. The economic impact during construction alone has been estimated at \$200 million for the host city. That prospect has Moody and Tuscola grinning like storyboard cats.

Kleiss: "On the world map"

Kleiss, Hoel, Moody and other city and county leaders huddled around computer monitors Tuesday morning to witness a webcast of the FutureGen announcement. They had already been informed a little while earlier in the day that Tuscola and Mattoon made the cut, but they were keen to see the news conference itself, held at FutureGen Alliance headquarters in Pittsburgh.

Next week Moody and other local leaders will attend a meeting in Pittsburgh to go over the next steps in the selection process. A lot of

work lies ahead—preparing environmental studies, transmitting mountains of geological data, assembling detailed information about the local site. Water and ground studies need to be conducted, an environmental audit—the requirements will be extensive and highly technical.

But Tuscola is ready. The Illinois legislature earlier this year appropriated \$17 million to fund such studies, so local taxpayers should not have to invest much money at this stage.

If Tuscola is selected next year, improvements will be necessary on township roads near the plant, which would be

located at 750 East and 1050 North, said Jim Crain, Douglas County engineer. But there is a year to plan for the needed work.

Even if Tuscola loses out to one of the other three sites, it has already benefitted from its exposure in the race to land FutureGen, according to Moody. TEDI has "already had several inquiries as a direct result of publicity from FutureGen. And it will continue to generate leads."

As Mayor Kleiss put it, "This is a good, positive thing for the city of Tuscola. FutureGen has put us on the world map."