

Why FutureGen power plant is so important to Illinois

The FutureGen coal-fueled power plant, which is bound for either Illinois or Texas, holds great promise for the nation's 28 coal-producing states, but nowhere is it more important than Illinois.

The next 14 months are going to be long ones for officials in Tuscola, Mattoon and Springfield. That's how long the FutureGen Industrial Alliance is giving itself to decide whether to build the nation's first coal-fueled, zero-emissions power plant. Tuscola and Mattoon are finalists for the project, as are two sites in Texas.

The immediate benefits to East Central Illinois of winning the FutureGen sweepstakes are obvious: a billion-dollar investment in the area, an estimated 1,000 construction jobs, about 150 permanent jobs beginning in 2012, millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements to support the project, scientists and researchers visiting the plant from all over the world.

That alone is enough to justify all the attention the FutureGen project will be receiving from state and local officials for the next year (beginning this week with a meeting in Pittsburgh among all the interested parties, including those from Texas). Then there's the issue of inducements. Illinois is offering a rich concoction of financial incentives, including millions in direct grants, about \$15 million in sales tax exemptions and \$50 million worth of below market-rate financing.

And the state's congressional delegation, responding quickly to a presumed Texas advantage, is considering whether to promote legislation in Congress that would make taxpayers liable in the event that carbon dioxide, which would be pumped underground in a process called carbon sequestration, leaked out or caused any other problems. Texas' Legislature has already passed a bill permitting the Lone Star State to assume the carbon dioxide liability there. The Illinois General Assembly may be asked to do the same, if the courts

rule it is permissible.

Why is Illinois' aggressive courtship of FutureGen necessary, particularly if, as its advocates insist, this state-of-the-art power plant will be so successful that it soon will be replicated all over the world?

It's not about being the first, or about beating Texas in a high-stakes industrial (and political) contest. Bringing FutureGen to Illinois is much more important than that.

It's about reviving a broken-down industry that once employed tens of thousands of Illinoisans, was a lifeblood for dozens of down-state communities and provided low-cost fuel for Illinois power plants.

No state comes close to matching Illinois in the amount of recoverable bituminous coal, the kind of high-sulfur, high-energy coal that would benefit from FutureGen's success. The federal Energy Information Administration estimates Illinois' recoverable reserves at 38 million tons — more than four times the 9 million in Texas. In addition, having FutureGen in Illinois — close to other big bituminous coal states like West Virginia (18 million tons), Kentucky (15 million tons) Ohio and Pennsylvania (11 million tons each) — would benefit the entire eastern half of the country, where the coal industry has been set back by pollution control laws since the 1970s.

FutureGen officials say they would be using coal from all over the country, not just the state where the plant is located.

It's about making use of the coal research facilities and experts already at nearby Southern Illinois University and the University of Illinois.

It's about making use of the geological formations far under the Illinois prairie, formations that would not only be used to store carbon dioxide but also would help recover oil.

It's about making Illinois, already a leader in alternative fuels like ethanol, wind power, biomass and nuclear power, even more of a research center for energy technology.

The success of FutureGen is important to the entire nation, but nowhere is it more important than in Illinois.