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Advocates promise emissions reductions with coal project

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Published Thursday, July 17, 2008

JUNEAU — The fate of an ambitious coal gasification project proposed for the Fairbanks area could hinge on the project's ability to reduce greenhouse gas emissions linked to global climate change.

Advocates of the project say it could lower overall emissions — despite coal's relatively high carbon footprint — by using plant material along with coal, burying carbon dioxide underground and displacing less-efficient means of space heating.

If the project won't reduce emissions, advocates say, it simply won't happen.

“If we can't reduce the life-cycle carbon footprint, then the project doesn't go forward,” Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Jim Whitaker said Sunday. “That's the deal.”

Jim Dodson, president of the Fairbanks Economic Development Corp., made the same promise Wednesday.

“It's a requirement,” he said of reducing carbon emissions.

The FEDC and borough are pursuing the project jointly with \$300,000 in state funds and \$250,000 in borough funds.

The project involves gasifying coal and biomass and converting the product into synthetic fuels, including jet fuel and diesel. The project would also generate electricity for the Fairbanks area and distribute waste heat for space heating.

Overall, the project is expected to cost between \$500 million and \$2 billion, Whitaker said.

FEDC has hired the Toronto-based engineering firm Hatch Ltd. to study the feasibility of the project and create an estimate of carbon dioxide emissions.

Whitaker said the borough has contracted with the Alaska Center for Energy and Power at the University of Alaska Fairbanks to study current emissions levels in the area.

The gasification project grew out of an energy-related task force chaired by Steve Haagenson, now the state's energy coordinator.

The project was described as a way to reduce the cost of energy and take advantage of abundant coal resources but also as part of an overall plan to dramatically shrink emissions of carbon dioxide.

Some question whether the project will meet those goals.

Bob Shavelson, executive director of Cook Inletkeeper, which has been tracking the use of coal in Alaska, said it's unlikely that a coal project will reduce overall emissions.

When the energy used in mining and transporting the coal is considered, liquid fuels made from coal have a "much larger" carbon footprint than conventional liquid fuels, he said. On top of that, the technology to capture and store carbon dioxide is still being developed.

"We think it's a bad idea to put a lot of money into this until you can show that you're not going to significantly increase greenhouse gases, or mercury ... or create habitat destruction (through mining)," he said.

Shavelson said investing in renewable energy projects using wind, geothermal and hydropower would make more sense.

David van den Berg, a member of the task force and former executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, said reducing emissions was a common theme at task force meetings. But he added that task force members never developed a foolproof plan for reducing emissions through coal gasification.

"I think they kind of deferred a real hard analysis of those types of questions," he said Wednesday.

For now, advocates hope the project will be able to reduce emissions, and they are pushing hard to build support for it.

Whitaker recently helped draft a proposal to provide \$21 billion in state support for renewable and alternative energy projects, including those making synthetic fuels from coal.

Whitaker and U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens are hosting an energy summit this week in Fairbanks to promote the project and try to secure state and federal support.

"The stage has to be set — assuming that the design criteria can be met," Whitaker said Wednesday. "And we think it can be."