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Dirty Coal Power and America's Energy Future

Scientists tell us we need to cut carbon emissions 80% by 2050, starting right away, in order to fight global warming. Yet right now, Congress is considering a series of energy bills that could dramatically increase our use of coal. Unfortunately, this legislation as written would do nothing to guarantee that coal is mined responsibly, burned cleanly, and does not worsen global warming. The truth is that many of the proposals on the table could take us backward, rather than moving us toward a new energy future.

Liquid Coal: Taxpayer Dollars to Increase Global Warming

Liquid coal produces double the global warming pollution as regular gasoline, and would require a more than 40 percent increase in coal mining just to displace 10 percent of our fuel. Even if the carbon produced was captured and stored, liquid coal would still release upwards of five to ten percent more global warming pollution than gasoline. In a time when we need to be reducing global warming pollution, liquid coal just does not make sense.

Not surprisingly, big coal industry advocates are asking Congress for billions of dollars in subsidies and tax breaks to artificially jumpstart this new industry. Unfortunately, both houses are considering passing these handouts even though the cost of building a liquid coal plant has been estimated by the government to cost upward of \$7 billion per plant. Taxpayers took a loss of billions of dollars on synfuels 30 years ago, and should not be forced to take the same gamble again on a technology that would take us backwards on global warming. Congress should turn back all attempts to move forward liquid coal legislation.

"Clean Coal" Is Nothing More Than Empty Promises

In response to the mounting toll of coal on our society and environment, the coal industry has promised to bring us "clean coal." However, these empty promises have become little more than a new way of naming the same old game. Industry has been fighting standards to clean up coal plants since the Clean Air Act was passed, and today many of our older plants still do not have the most basic and readily available pollution controls. The truth is coal as it exists today is anything but clean.

Some of the most promising "clean coal" technologies have yet to be proven effective in reducing the damages caused by coal. Carbon capture and sequestration (CCS), where carbon dioxide at coal-fired power plants is separated from the exhaust and then dumped underground, is still an unproven technology. The scale needed to store all of the carbon dioxide (CO₂) from our already existing fleet of coal-fired power plants is enormous, and the technological challenges of capturing, transporting, and storing the CO₂ for the



foreseeable future are daunting. Experts also disagree as to how long it will take for this technology to be available for commercial use and at a large enough scale to be a credible solution.

In spite of the plain evidence to the contrary, Congress is considering expanding our nation's use of coal by calling it "clean." Our elected officials need to stop and consider the full implications before leaping into decisions spurred by Big Coal and their campaign donations.

Coal Causes Other Harm beyond Global Warming

"Clean coal" also fails to consider the full life cycle of coal, including damages caused during coal mining and after electricity production. Coal mining can destroy forests and wildlife habitat, encourage soil erosion and floods, cause water pollution like acid mine drainage, and harm air quality. Burning coal leads to dangerous (and deadly) smog and soot air pollution, threatens our health with mercury contamination, and places a huge burden on our water supplies. And the wastes created during electricity production can destroy drinking water supplies and increase our risk of serious diseases like cancer.

One striking example of the upstream devastation caused by coal power is mountaintop removal mining, where coal companies clearcut native forests and blow off mountaintops with explosives and dump millions of tons of the waste rock into the valleys below. This most destructive form of coal mining poisons drinking water, lays waste to wildlife habitat, increases risk of flooding, and wipes out entire communities. Mountaintop removal mining has already buried and contaminated more than 1,200 miles of streams in Appalachia, and by the end of this century more than 2,200 square miles of Appalachian forests and mountains will be gone.

America's Energy Future

Last fall, Americans voted to move in a new and different direction on energy. We need urgent and meaningful action that will put our country on a path to reduce U.S. global warming emissions 80 percent by 2050, the level scientists tell us will protect us from the worst impacts of global warming. Unfortunately, this two percent a year reduction cannot be met if we continue to rely on coal with a business as usual mindset.

Right now, we need to make sure that Congress does not tie our hands by further hitching our future to coal until we figure out how to mine it responsibly, burn it cleanly, and not move backward on global warming. This means fending off any attempts to pass destructive provisions on liquid coal or to encourage expanding our coal use before carbon capture and sequestration technologies are proven and commercially available. Congress should also work to correct the upstream problems with coal use, like passing the Clean Water Protection Act to protect our streams and wetlands from coal wastes.

The good news is that we have cleaner, cheaper, smarter choices. A recent study compiled by experts from some of our most prestigious universities and national laboratories shows that through energy efficiency measures and the development renewable energy resources, we can get on a path that will enable us to reach the carbon emission reductions that scientists say we need to fend off the worst effects of global warming. We do not have to settle for a dirty "can't-do" agenda dictated to the nation by the coal industry. We can meet our energy needs with home-grown sources that help the environment, decrease our energy dependence, and put money back into the budgets of American families and communities.