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Coal-to-liquids: An idea to explore

BISMARCK - With the vacation season ahead, Americans are paying record high prices for gasoline and relying too much on foreign countries for the gasoline they use.

This summer, Congress will have the chance to help us on both counts - reduce prices at the pump and help Americans become energy independent.

To do this, America needs to develop its coal reserves - the world's largest. North Dakota alone has 25 billion tons of economical lignite reserves, enough to last more than 800 years at current levels of consumption.

Coal provides half of the electricity Americans use. And with technology already in use elsewhere around the world, coal also can be turned into ultraclean transportation fuels for cars, trucks and jet engines.

In North Dakota, three companies - Great River Energy, North American Coal Corp. and Headwaters Energy Services - have formed a consortium known as American Lignite Energy to explore building a coal-based refinery to produce 32,000 barrels of ultraclean liquid transportation fuels per day. The facility also would make electricity and carbon dioxide that could be captured and used for enhanced oil recovery.

In the coming weeks, Congress will be working to pass energy legislation to reduce our dependence on foreign countries. North Dakota's delegation has shown its support.

It's time that we look to the Midwest for our energy answers and not to the Mideast. By using more of our coal, our most abundant fuel, we can use less imported oil and increase our energy independence.

John Dwyer

Dwyer is president of the Lignite Energy Council, a group devoted to maintaining a viable lignite coal industry.