

The Fresno Bee

A balanced way to solve our energy crisis

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The past two months, Americans have been stuck watching a fiercely partisan debate over energy policy. While both sides have some valid ideas, we know Harry Potter can't wave his magic wand and wish the energy crisis away. A shouting match between Democrats and Republicans won't solve the problem either.

We need a bipartisan approach to find solutions that can and will make a difference. Earlier this summer, we organized such a group. Congressman John Peterson, R-Pennsylvania; Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii; Dan Burton, R-Indiana; and I gathered together like-minded representatives from around the nation to develop an energy bill, which was introduced last month.

This bill uses many of the energy tools in our toolbox to not only drill for more domestic oil and gas, but to transition our fossil-fuel economy to alternative and renewable sources.

The National Conservation, Environment and Energy Independence Act is a comprehensive energy package that first removes the existing moratoria on oil and natural gas production in the outer continental shelf for waters 25 miles offshore and beyond. For waters that are 25-50 miles from shore, the bill gives states the right to opt out and remove those areas from leasing. The bill prohibits leasing within 25 miles of a coastline. States will receive 30% of the royalties from oil and gas production.

This legislation uses the royalties generated by the offshore oil and gas production to fund energy conservation, as well as the development of alternative fuels and renewable-energy technologies, making it a balanced package. For example, 15% of the royalty funds will go to the Renewable Energy Reserve fund, created within the bill. Another 5% will pay for research and development regarding carbon capture and sequestration, as well as the reprocessing or disposal of nuclear waste -- which is the key to the increased safe use of nuclear power.

The bill also extends numerous existing tax incentives for cleaner energy production and conservation, including solar and wind power, energy-efficiency measures and alternative-fuel vehicles.

In addition, the bill modifies the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to today's refining capabilities by exchanging 10% (about 70 million barrels) of the reserve's content and dedicates funds received from the exchange (\$1.4 billion estimated) to existing conservation, energy research and development and energy-assistance programs.

The use of fossil fuels will change, and in the future, our children and grandchildren will likely rely on multiple energy sources.

Solar power is improving, and with the ample sunshine in our Valley, we will benefit greatly from solar energy. During the last session of Congress, I co-sponsored the Solar Energy Research and Advancement Act, which establishes a research and development program to provide lower-cost and more viable thermal energy storage technologies. This legislation also establishes a competitive grant program to create and strengthen the solar-industry work force and assist in commercial application of direct solar renewable-energy sources.

Solar is not the only renewable-energy source that will thrive in our Valley. Already Kern County is one of the state's main producers of wind energy -- and that's expected only to grow. We also have dairy farmers and utility companies partnering to generate electricity using the methane gas from their farms.

We can also reduce the demand for oil by improving the fuel economy of our automobiles. Last session, Congress established a single Corporate Average Fuel Economy standard for automakers of 35 miles per gallon by model year 2020. More funding for the development of electric and hydrogen-fueled cars will only improve this number. The development of high-speed rail systems in California and elsewhere in America is also key to improving air quality for our Valley.

We need to step out of the current energy crisis and end the partisan bickering. A combination of increasing our own domestic supply and reducing demand will lower energy costs and create new jobs, getting us through a transition period during the next 20 years.

It is also vital that our nation move toward clean and renewable sources of energy. This is a big test for our country and its leadership that we cannot afford to fail.