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OUR OPINION

Lugar takes best shot at energy plan

There should be no doubt that the United States needs an energy and climate policy, just as there should be no expectation of a perfect law to that effect — one that satisfies industry, environmentalists, consumers and legislators from states with varying fossil-fuel dependency.

Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., seeks to address both realities with a bill to be introduced next week aimed at wooing colleagues whose support is lacking for the Democratic plan of the moment.

With polls showing weak popular regard for cap-and-trade, and with votes lacking from coal-state Democrats as well as Republicans, the Kerry-Lieberman bill appears permanently stalled. This, despite concessions to energy companies and coal-dependent states, made at the cost of alienating many environmental groups.

Lugar's bill will not please those who in-

sist on tough immediate mandates for cutting emissions and raising the proportion of energy drawn from renewable sources. It does advance the discussion, however, by emphasizing conservation, nuclear power and the phase-out of aging coal-powered generating plants. It tends to subordinate long-term economies to existing jobs and utility rate restraint, but Lugar insists there's no ultimate conflict.

"It's more practical," says his spokesman, Andy Fisher. "It saves consumers money. It fixes the leaks (in building design and construction). It goes after efficiencies, which are the low-hanging fruit here. Ergo: emissions reduction."

Reduction of oil imports is another key feature, striking at the worst culprit in the nation's trade deficit as well as a prime threat to its security. Whether the teeth are there to meet Lugar's goal of a 68 percent reduction by 2030 is a burning question.

Half the job would be done via vehicle fuel efficiency — for the most part, extending current federal standards but with various waiver options. When Lugar himself is pointing out that oil imports account for half the trade deficit, and twice the deficit with China, stronger measures may have to be in a final package.

China, incidentally, is racing ahead in the green energy business, in which Lugar likewise takes a carrot-rather-than-stick approach. He stresses incentives and state choice, rather than a national standard, for the share of the pie taken up by alternative fuels. Many states (not yet Indiana) already have set their own bars.

How much federal muscle is needed to augment state initiatives and market forces toward balanced energy usage remains to be decided. Lugar's bill will not constitute an energy policy, but it could help form a foundation for one by getting the most out of the politics that prevail.