

Henderson studying strategies for energy

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Local officials are hoping to position Henderson as a focal point for alternative energy production and research in Kentucky.

To help make that possible, the creation of the Henderson Energy Advisory Team (HEAT) was announced Wednesday by Henderson County Judge-executive Sandy Watkins, Mayor Tom Davis and state Sen. Dorsey Ridley.

"It shows Henderson wants to be a leader in the future of energy," Ridley said.

Among the energy-related activities proposed or possible here include:

- Encouraging construction of giant chemical plants to convert coal into synthetic natural gas or liquid fuels.
- Promoting development of distilleries to make ethanol or biodiesel fuels from corn and soybeans raised in the region.
- Hosting a research project concerning capturing carbon dioxide from power plants and pumping it deep underground to help slow global warming.
- Or even hosting research into how to grow algae to absorb carbon dioxide from power plant exhaust and then convert the algae into a biofuel.

Those and perhaps other activities are being touted as ways to help America gain greater energy independence, HEAT's backers say.

"There's not what we could call the one silver bullet" to achieving such independence, Ridley said. "It will take a multitude of things."

Henderson, he and other officials say, has a multitude of resources to apply toward the future of alternative energy sources, including:

- Coal: Western Kentucky has a reported 21.8 billion tons of coal reserves.
- Oil: Approximately 18,000 oil wells have been drilled within 50 miles of Henderson, and injecting carbon dioxide from power plants into underground formations could help bolster production from some aging wells.

- Grain: Henderson and nine nearby western Kentucky counties in 2006 produced 50 million bushels of corn and 20 million bushels of soybeans, accounting for one-third the state's total production and providing a potential feedstock for energy plants.

- Transportation: The Ohio and Green rivers provide a low-cost mode of transportation for moving coal and other feedstocks, while the presence of interstate gas pipelines here could provide a means for transporting synthetic natural gas.

- Expertise: Several energy companies have their headquarters or an office in Henderson, including Big Rivers Electric Corp., Orbit Gas Transmission and Patriot Coal, in addition to the Kentucky Geological Survey office, which works extensively with coal, oil and gas producers.

The Henderson area also has some momentum.

An ethanol plant has been proposed for construction on the Henderson-Webster county line, while Peabody Energy Corp. is considering Henderson and four other western Kentucky counties for a coal gasification plant.

Ridley said the Geological Survey office here will be used for research into carbon sequestration in western Kentucky. "That's probably a good building block" for further research, Davis said.

And citizens such as John Dunaway and Crichton Comer are enthusiastic about research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concerning the use of algae to consume carbon dioxide from power plant exhaust and then being used as fuel. With so many power plants operating in this area, and with another plant (the Cash Creek project) proposed, they see potential for Henderson to be a site for such research.

Ridley agrees, and said he has been talking with University of Kentucky President Lee Todd, a MIT graduate, about pursuing such research here.

Next week, Rodney Andrews, the director of UK's Center for Applied Energy Research, is scheduled to speak to Henderson Rotarians, accompanied by Talina Matthews, executive director of the state Office of Energy Policy.

With so many energy-related projects in development, "We think we need to be more proactive," Watkins said.

"(Here in) western Kentucky, we've talked about energy for years," he said. "Let's put a team together ... and make it work."

Watkins and Davis plan to appoint 15 to 20 members in the coming weeks to HEAT to focus on whether Henderson needs additional infrastructure and to encourage state funding for energy research and work force training.

"With all the things breaking and with all the different companies looking at our region, we think Henderson should have the resources available all the companies coming in," Davis said.

"We just feel if we can get all the people together that we can get some additional funding together and create an opportunity for somebody like Peabody or other companies," Ridley said.