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Research Assignment
23 August 2007

Increasing Energy Efficiency in the 110th Congress

Few issues have the ability to affect the daily lives of not only our national population, but that of the world. When technology has the ability to alter the very environment we depend on for existence, it is only expected that our leaders act in a responsible and timely manner. The issue of energy efficiency and its contribution to global warming is inarguably a high stakes policy issue. We have many tools and technology to mitigate this environmental degradation and resulting economic losses. Political will is what must be encouraged, in order to more adequately address this complex and important issue.

While the two issues of energy efficiency and global warming are closely intertwined, this paper will focus on the aspects of energy efficiency and the resulting global warming benefits. Energy efficiency should be considered a long-term policy issue for a few reasons: First, energy efficiency can only be achieved through scientific advances. While some minor changes, such as switching from incandescent to fluorescent light bulbs, have the ability to conserve a great deal of energy, many are long term projects that require innovation and a great deal of funding, as well as continued congressional

support. This kind of research and development cannot fit neatly into two or even six year terms. However, this kind of investment must be made nonetheless, because current consumption of oil by Americans outpaced production over three decades ago, and the world supply of petroleum is steadily decreasing while demand continues to increase.

This issue is not simply a matter of paying higher prices at the gas pump. Oil is used not only to fuel motor vehicles, but also to manufacture a large deal of consumer products, including chemicals and pharmaceuticals, as well as surfacing our interstate and highway systems. A report from the Government Accountability Office, "Crude Oil: Uncertainty about Future Oil Supply Makes It Important to Develop a Strategy for Addressing a Peak and Decline in Oil Production" states that hitting peak oil production could result in worldwide recession. Furthermore, Congress reports that global demand for energy is expected to grow from the current rate of 80,000,000 barrels per day to 118,000,000 barrels a day in 2030. The United States' demand is projected to grow over 20% by 2040. This illustrates that even though energy availability is a global problem, action by the United States Congress can still be effective.

A reduction in American oil consumption will undoubtedly be felt on the world scene, as the United States consumes approximately 20,800,000 barrels of oil a day, over one quarter

of the global consumption rate, according to a study conducted by the Energy Information Administration and commissioned by Congress. Additionally, only about 1 percent of this petroleum consumption can be replaced with alternative technologies. The United States Department of Energy estimates that by the year 2015, this figure will have only risen to 4 percent if new technology is not developed and utilized and current alternative energy technology is not expanded.

Currently, many opportunities exist to increase the 1% figure. Technologies do exist, that is implemented on a broad scale, would greatly reduce petroleum consumption. Petroleum is a finite resource, at least in relation to the human lifespan; congressional mandates must promote alternate technologies and conservation in order to ease the transition to a global society less dependent on petroleum. However, one of the difficulties experienced when moving towards a more energy efficient nation is the lack of popular appeal of these technologies. The financial benefits may not be readily available in the short term, and the market alone will likely not provide consumers with enough incentive to encourage utilization of petroleum alternatives. Raising public awareness on the part of legislator, and incentives built into legislation such as subsidies or tax breaks are a logical way to promote energy conservation.

Since January, there have been hundreds of pieces of legislation with provisions to make energy use more efficient. Of course, many are still held up in committee, and many did not make it to passage. Most of the legislation that did pass was narrowly focused on a small part of the energy puzzle, and tacked onto a larger, unrelated bill or resolution. This specific approach is not a bad thing, because in order for conservation measures to be as effective as possible, they need to be applied to an entire industry. If the multiple facets of a large industry are not addressed in the legislation, then the benefits of the technology or measures being advocated cannot be fully maximized.

In order to make the most out of our remaining petroleum resources, as well as to take full advantage of our nation's ability to research and develop new technologies, congress must offer financial support to institutions working towards this end. Funding should be legislated for those working towards the development of any of the following technologies: clean coal, anaerobic digesters and methane, biofuels, wind energy, solar energy, ocean energy, hydrogen fuel cells, natural gas, and fusion and fission technologies. This may be a long list, but different regions are better situated to support specific types of alternative energy sources, and as none of these methods are currently able to produce enough energy to even come close to

replacing petroleum, a range of options should continue to be explored.

As for more specific policy initiatives, congress ought to support increasing fuel economy standards of vehicles, the installation and use of energy efficient light bulbs, installation of solar panels, strengthening the policies that promote energy efficient home appliances, hybrid vehicles, the use of public transportation, and the building of more energy efficient homes and businesses.

What might be considered a weakness for the environmental conservation cause is also one of its legislative strengths. There is no single policy that guarantees a massive reduction in petroleum use. There are, as demonstrated in the preceding paragraph, many different methods with varying levels of effectiveness. Implemented effectively and on a mass scale, however, than any single method has the ability to achieve success as a policy, and thus make it easier for future conservation and innovation programs, as well as funding for research and development.

The idea that congress is ill suited to aptly discuss and solve long term problems is less applicable to the energy conservation initiative than to other issues. This is not necessarily a positive thing, however, because the nation is already feeling the effects of a looming energy shortage. Were

this discussion held 10 years earlier, than the passage of recent conservation legislation would have likely not been as possible. Currently, constituents, even in the conservative second district of Kansas, are clamoring for higher fuel efficiency standards. This kind of support makes it much easier for Congress, especially the House, to pass energy efficient legislation.