



The Patriot-News

Drilling? Coal? Nuclear? Wind? This election has Americans asking What's the alternative?

Sunday, October 19, 2008

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Of The Patriot-News

It seems like only yesterday that Pennsylvanians were reeling from the high cost of gasoline.

On the campaign trail, Republican presidential nominee John McCain thought he had the answer to those concerns and chanted "Drill, baby, drill!" His Democratic opponent, Sen. Barack Obama, talked about developing renewable resources like solar and wind and biofuels to reduce demand for gas.

Now, gasoline has fallen below \$3 a gallon, and Wall Street is in turmoil.

But energy remains a high-profile issue for voters in this election, said G. Terry Madonna, director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster.

"Energy is part of the overall problem voters see with the economy," he said.

The energy policies of the next president will play a crucial role in the nation's economic future because moving away from oil will require billions in new spending. There will be refineries to build, research to be conducted, power plants to be built.

A recent study by the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the Center for American Progress estimated that a \$100 billion investment by Congress in programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions could create 2 million jobs, about 86,000 of them in Pennsylvania.

So which candidate's energy plan would best benefit Pennsylvanians? That's hard to say.

"You're not going to find major differences between the two candidates in the majority of renewable and clean energy issues," said John Nikoloff, a partner in Pennsylvania Energy Resources Group, a Harrisburg-based consulting firm.

Where they differ, he said, is on oil drilling, and building new nuclear power plants.

Some common ground:

McCain and Obama want to reduce consumption of foreign oil through the use of alternative energy sources, biofuels and conservation.

Obama and McCain support some form of off-shore drilling for oil and natural gas. Obama would limit drilling to existing leases. McCain would open new areas off the Atlantic coast.

The candidates say nuclear energy must be a part of the nation's energy mix, but McCain's policy is more aggressively pro-nuclear than Obama's.

Both want automakers to improve the fuel efficiency of their vehicles and increase the number of hybrid, electric and fuel-cell options.

McCain initially had traction with his energy policies, particularly with his support of off-shore drilling to increase the nation's domestic oil production. But he appears to have lost ground in recent weeks.

According to September polling data by Madonna, 50 percent of voters think Obama is better able to develop an energy policy to reduce reliance on foreign oil, compared to 35 percent for McCain.

Madonna suggested that public sentiment has shifted in favor of a larger government role in energy policy, rather than relying on market forces. That shift favors Obama.

"McCain, for the moment, seems to be on the wrong side of what voters want," Madonna said.

Clean-coal appeal:

Ben Wootton is the president of Keystone Biofuels in Shiremanstown. His small company has the capacity to generate 20 million gallons of ethanol a year from new or used vegetable oils and animal fats. But his company produces only 2 million because the demand isn't there yet.

For Wootton, McCain's calls for more oil drilling and the use of clean coal are negatives. The future, Wootton said, is not in oil or coal.

"I'm not bashing McCain," he said. "But if I'm looking at both candidates, it seems like Obama is stronger on renewables."

Both candidates support the development of so-called clean coal, a version that is less polluting, as an integral part of the nation's energy future. Obama includes it in his proposed \$150 billion 10-year clean energy program, but is not specific on how much. McCain wants to commit \$30 million over 15 years to developing clean coal technology.

Rebecca Tallent, a senior policy adviser for the McCain campaign, said energy is a top-tier issue for the Republican nominee. On clean coal, McCain sees not only the potential for a cleaner energy source, but economic growth.

If America can develop cleaner technology and export it, it can boost the nation's economy and help reduce carbon emissions, she said.

Kathleen McGinty, former secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and now an adviser to Obama, said his administration would invest billions in coal technology, a move that would be huge for Pennsylvania.

"We sit on 300 years worth of resources," she said. "It promises job growth and economic vitality if we can find a way to use it cleanly."

New support for nuclear:

Nuclear energy has strong potential for growth in Pennsylvania despite hosting the nation's most notorious plant -- Three Mile Island.

The first nuclear reactor in the nation was built in Shippingport, Beaver County. Pennsylvania has five nuclear plant sites and nine commercial reactors, which generate about 36 percent of its electricity.

Here, McCain and Obama differ in terms of intensity.

McCain has called for the construction of 45 new nuclear plants in the U.S. by 2030, with an ultimate goal of 100. If successful, it would more than double the number of nuclear sites in the country and increase the amount of electricity from atomic sources by 30 percent.

He would help the industry through a combination of tax credits and a cap and trade program based on carbon emission credits, Tallent said.

Obama, whose home state of Illinois hosts Exelon Corp., the largest nuclear generating company in the U.S., supports the use of nuclear power but is not ready to start a race to build new plants. Obama said more needs to be done to protect nuclear fuel from terrorists, and address how to store the waste.

"Obama's approach is more sober," McGinty said. "But ... Obama's clear view has been that our policy is that nuclear is an essential part of the mix."

The economic impact of just one new plant in Pennsylvania would be significant, said Mitch Singer, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, which represents the nuclear industry.

If PPL gets permission to build a new plant at its Susquehanna site in Berwick, it is expected to create about

2,200 jobs during construction, and 400 permanent high-paying positions, he said.

Could the nation build 45 plants in the next 21 years as McCain suggests? Singer said it's possible, but unlikely.

NEI projects the nation could have four to eight new reactors online by 2017.

The highly radioactive waste those new plants will produce will have to be stored on site, because the federal government has yet to create a permanent storage facility. The U.S. Department of Energy this year applied for a license to open a controversial facility at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. But the plant is bitterly opposed by Nevadans, as well as Obama and McCain.

Both candidates want to explore reprocessing nuclear waste as fuel. France reprocesses spent nuclear fuel, but it is illegal in the U.S. due to fears the material will be stolen and other safety issues.

Energy requires money:

All of the proposals ring hollow for Barry Bernsten, a Philadelphia-area entrepreneur, and founder of BG Automotive Group, which plans to open a manufacturing plant to build plug-in electric cars in Pennsylvania next year.

Though he acknowledged that both candidates have proposals that would benefit his car business, he said he does not see enough specifics from either candidate on everything else.

His biggest concern is how either candidate will pay for the programs.

"They're not going to raise taxes, but they have an Iraq war to fund, schools to fund," he said.

Despite those concerns, he plans to vote for Obama.

Nikoloff, the energy consultant, is leaning toward McCain. He agreed with Bernsten: too much talk, not enough cash.

Nikoloff said, "The problem is, will there be any money left to finance it?"

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