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Marshall County Hopes To Capitalize on Coal

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Marshall County officials hope the work they've already done on a possible coal co-generation plant will work in their favor now that Gov. Joe Manchin has unveiled plans to put the Mountain State at the forefront of a nationwide effort to reduce America's dependence on foreign oil.

Manchin wants to put together a public-private partnership geared at developing state-of-the-art coal conversion facilities and infrastructure in West Virginia capable of adapting to the changing needs of the marketplace "and produce whatever product is most needed at a specific time — be it natural gas, diesel fuel, jet fuel, hydrogen or chemicals."

With an estimated 50 billion tons of coal reserves, West Virginia figures to be a key player in the nation's new energy policy. Marshall County ranks sixth overall among West Virginia counties in terms of total coal production but second in deep-mined coal tonnage.

"We feel we're in a perfect position here in Marshall County," Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Dave Knuth said. "We're already the second largest producer of deep-mined coal with regard to coal-producing counties in West Virginia."

"But besides having the coal reserves available, we also have properties that would adapt themselves to some type of coal gasification plant."

Knuth said the National Research Center for Coal and Energy at West Virginia University has been working with the National Energy Technology Lab, part of the U.S. Department of Energy, to determine the feasibility of developing a coal co-generation plant in the Northern Panhandle.

Co-generation typically allows a power station to simultaneously generate electricity and heat. But byproducts of the co-generation process — in particular, chemicals and sulfur — also could be harnessed for existing industrial plants, he said.

While the preliminary feasibility study identified more than \$100 million in potential cost savings yearly for those ancillary industries, the cost to build such a co-generation plant likely would be in the billion-dollar range.

That kind of investment will require government involvement.

"I do think our study is an asset," Knuth said. "I think we've got a little bit of an edge because of that preliminary feasibility study; also the sites we have

available and our coal reserves and the ability we have to remove the coal reserves we already have in place. We have mines already here and in operation."

The community is already enjoying an economic spark rooted in its coal industry: American Electric Power (AEP) is spending about \$850 million to install coal scrubbers that will make its Mitchell Plant more environmentally friendly. The synthetic gypsum that is produced as a byproduct of the desulfurization process will be used to make drywall at a new, \$150 million state-of-the-art plant that will be built next door.

Talk of expanding coal's role in the national economy is music to the ears of coal producers such as CONSOL Energy, which has about 2.5 billion tons of coal reserves and significant property holdings in West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania, as well as energy producers like AEP.

CONSOL spokesman Tom Hoffman said CONSOL's huge expanses of coal reserves and land in the Mountain State, including Marshall County, along with its mining expertise and its research and development activities, lend themselves to the coal conversion initiative "but all that has to be explored when there's a specific proposal on the table."

Michael Morris, AEP president, chairman and CEO, and U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., also have discussed the possibility of building a 600-megawatt power plant that would use integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) technology to turn coal into electricity and other products "at high efficiencies and with low emissions."

Byrd said West Virginia "has the work force, the coal and the desire to be home to a new AEP power plant."

"If West Virginia is selected for this new power plant, it would mean an infusion of new jobs, construction of a 21st century facility and a continued commitment to West Virginia coal," he said. "This new plant would be a mainstay of West Virginia for many years to come."

Byrd said a new power plant using IGCC technologies "would demonstrate that there is a long life ahead for West Virginia coal. It would show what I have believed for a long time, namely, that energy production and environmental protection can work in tandem. We can burn coal more cleanly and efficiently, and we can find new ways to address climate change."

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