

POLITICO

Energy debate gains steam

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When President Barack Obama travels to Penn State University on Thursday to promote his clean energy agenda, he'll visit a campus that has become a symbolic battleground in the national debate over coal, natural gas and the administration's increasingly controversial pollution regulations.

The university's trustees voted Jan. 21 to spend up to \$35 million to convert an 82-year-old steam plant on Penn State's main campus in State College, Pa., to burn natural gas instead of coal by 2014.

The switch - inspired partly by the Obama administration's proposal to regulate emissions from industrial boilers - makes Penn State the latest of at least 10 U.S. colleges and universities to commit to shifting away from coal, a goal for student activist groups and the Sierra Club's national Campuses Beyond Coal campaign.

The decision dismayed supporters of Pennsylvania's coal industry while offering a publicity boost to the natural gas sector, which has been hammered lately over pollution concerns raised by the extraction technique known as "fracking." The shift also inspired mixed emotions among environmental activists who aren't fond of either fuel source, even though burning natural gas emits fewer greenhouse gases and toxics such as mercury than does burning coal.

People on all sides see a certain amount of symbolism in the switch occurring near the geographic center of a state in which both coal and gas play major roles.

Penn State, which operates a Coal and Coke Heritage Center on a campus southeast of Pittsburgh, also sits amid the Marcellus Shale natural-gas-producing region, where much of the fracking controversy has been centered. Coincidentally, the Sierra Club last week named a State College-based activist, Deborah Nardone, as director of a national campaign to "reform" the natural gas industry.

Pennsylvania also has much untapped potential for producing wind and solar power, said Kim Teplitzky, the Sierra Student Coalition representative for the Campuses Beyond Coal campaign. Those are the types of renewable energy alternatives that her group hopes Penn State will eventually embrace.

"It's a flagship school in Pennsylvania, which is an important state for all of these issues," Teplitzky said.

George Ellis, president of the Pennsylvania Coal Association, also saw symbolic importance in the trustees' decision but was less than thrilled about it.

"Penn State is in the heart of coal country," said Ellis, who called the trustees' decision "unfortunate" and "overly reactive." While the steam plant doesn't burn a huge amount of coal - generally less than 80,000 tons a year, none of it is produced in Pennsylvania - Ellis said the vote was significant in terms of "the message you're sending."

Obama's visit is expected to include a tour of labs working on ways to increase energy efficiency in buildings. Ellis said he hopes the president will also embrace energy production from homegrown sources such as coal, oil, natural gas and nuclear power. "Coal is still our most affordable and reliable energy source," Ellis said.

Meanwhile, former-Pennsylvania-governor-turned-natural-gas-industry-adviser Tom Ridge issued a statement Monday welcoming the attention that the state's gas resources will receive - from both the president's visit and the university's fuel switch.

"Penn State is making common-sense investments aimed at leveraging the Marcellus Shale's abundant, clean-burning natural gas reserves for electricity generation," said Ridge, former secretary of the Homeland Security Department, who went to work for the Marcellus Shale Coalition last year.

But environmentalists said they hope natural gas won't have a long future at Penn State.

The trustees' decision drew criticism from the campus group Eco-Action, which had held demonstrations and meetings with administrators to call for an end to burning coal in the steam plant.

"The proposal of natural gas for the west campus steam plant is unfortunate, but not unexpected," the group said in a statement e-mailed to a campus blog. Eco-Action called on the university to "develop a plan for a swift transition away from fossil fuels. We won't be satisfied until this process is complete."

Teplitzky said students will continue to press their case for renewable fuels, and in the meantime, activists will urge administrators to increase energy efficiency in buildings on the sprawling campus.

But for now, she said, the vote is a victory toward the goal of ending all coal burning on college campuses.

"Certainly, we're not done with our work there," she said. "While gas is not *the* decision at Penn State, it is an important step."

A major impetus for Penn State's switch is the Obama administration's proposed boiler regulations, one of several Environmental Protection Agency efforts that have drawn attacks on Capitol Hill.

While the EPA has released only a draft of the boiler rule - the final version is due by Feb. 21 - if the university had stuck with coal, it would have spent substantial amounts on scrubbers and other pollution controls, said Ian Salada, manager of engineering services at Penn State's Office of Physical Plant. He said the result is "a fairly level playing field between the two fuels" - and switching to gas may even end up as the cheaper option.

The fuel switch will affect the campus's main steam plant, which produces steam to heat buildings and for other purposes, as well as a small amount of electrical cogeneration. That plant has four boilers that primarily run on coal, plus one that can already burn gas. A second steam plant can burn either oil or natural gas.

Salada said the university plans to continue exploring a range of other possible energy sources, including biomass and geothermal. For now, he said, none of the technologies appear able to offer enough reliable, economically feasible energy soon enough to meet the EPA's proposed 2014 deadline.

"On a personal level, I think we will be implementing some of those technologies in the near future," he said. "When it all shakes out, we'll probably have a number of different technologies ... instead of just one. Instead of converting everything to biomass, we might have one biomass piece of equipment, another sector that's geothermal and one sector that's something else."

Teplitzky said the campus's debate signals the importance of the EPA's regulations in creating an economic incentive to shift away from dirtier fuels. She said she hopes Obama will defend the agency against attacks from members of Congress who condemn the regulations as "job killers."

"It's critical that he stands up on this issue and sees that this is one of the most important issues to young people," she said.

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