

Plant To Turn Schuylkill County Coal Waste Into Fuel

WEST HANOVER TOWNSHIP, Pa. -- In the next three years, mountains of coal waste in Schuylkill County could be converted into millions of gallons of diesel fuel as a new coal-to-diesel plant comes on line.

The project has attracted the attention of some of the candidates running for Congress in Tuesday's primary.

Long-haul trucker Jack VanDenburg gases up every other day, filling up one of two fuel tanks on his 18-wheeler.

"There's \$140 for 83 gallons of fuel. It's outrageous," VanDenburg said.

The trucker said it's getting more expensive due to rising diesel prices and it means higher prices for his customers

"We gotta do everything we can to cut costs and we gotta pass it on to the consumer," VanDenburg said.

John Rich, president of WMPI, said the solution to rising fuel prices lies in thousands of tons of coal waste on the ground in Gilberton, Schuylkill County.

Last year, Rich's company received \$100 million from the U.S. Energy Department to build a processing plant to turn the ground coal waste at the Gilberton Coal Co. into clean burning, sulfur-free diesel fuel. It will produce 60 million gallons a year, according to the company. The company, which already operates a plant to turn coal into electricity, is hoping to open its new facility in 2007.

"This is going to stabilize the price of transportation fuel. Once this country, and its importing (of) 10 billion gallons of fuel, starts to build facilities like this, not just in Pennsylvania, but throughout the country, we're going to stabilize the price of fuel," Rich said.

The proposed coal-waste-to-diesel-fuel plant has the support of the six Republican candidates running in the 17th Congressional District, which includes Schuylkill County. They see it as a long-term solution to rising energy prices.

"The anthracite coal in Schuylkill County, it's clean burning; it's domestically available, and it's right here," candidate Bill Lynch said

during a debate.

"We are the country of innovation. We also need to explore our natural resources of turning coal into diesel," candidate Mark Stewart said during a debate.

"There's a coal gasification plant that's going to be on line shortly, and what we need to do is see what we can get out that, in order to reduce our dependence on oil," candidate Scott Paterno said during a debate.

Back at the gas pumps, truckers would welcome any kind of long term relief from rising fuel prices.

"Any way we can. I mean, our natural resources, they're not going to be here forever," VanDenburg said.

"The state of Pennsylvania has 34 billion tons of ground coal reserve, and for each ton we get three barrels of product, so the state of Pennsylvania alone has 100 billion barrel reserve that's larger than Iraq's reserves" Rich said.

Incumbent 17th District Rep. Tim Holden, a Democrat, also supports more federal money into this new technology. The Schuylkill County facility is expected to create 1,000 construction jobs and 600 permanent jobs.