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Candidates must face increased energy importation

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Guest columnist

At a time when U.S. dependence on imported oil and natural gas is at an all-time high, the presidential candidates continue to avoid the serious issues related to energy security. Such complacency is risky. Even if we don't face immediate shortages or other threats from oil-supplying nations in the Middle East and other politically volatile regions, the long-term danger will remain and even increase, as we continue sticking our heads in the sand.

We now import 60 percent of our oil, a number which could reach 70 percent within a few years. That is alarming, considering that we were importing only 33 percent in 1973, when the OPEC oil embargo led to severe gasoline shortages and high prices.

Roughly one-fourth of the foreign oil we use today comes from the Middle East. Saudi Arabia alone accounts for most of the oil from that unpredictable region. If that's not enough of a worry, now Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries will soon be exporting natural gas in its liquefied form to the United States. Last year liquefied natural gas accounted for just 2 percent of the U.S. natural gas supply, but the Energy Information Administration expects that by 2020 it could approach 20 percent.

Among the countries that will be supplying liquefied natural gas to the United States are Algeria, Indonesia, Malaysia and Angola. Most of that will be used at power plants to produce electricity.

The risk in relying on distant countries for both oil and natural gas — fuel that will be used to keep our lights on and our homes warm — should raise serious national concerns. Many of the countries that supply these energy sources are teetering on the brink of chaos. They could undergo political or cultural revolutions that would dramatically change their willingness to supply the energy we need.

Even if they continue to meet our growing energy demands, dangers still exist. Oil and gas facilities and tankers are highly vulnerable to terrorist attacks — which could not only cause great damage, but also halt shipment of the fuels our country desperately needs.

Yet the candidates have not really addressed the issue of energy dependence, our continued reliance on some of the most dangerous regions in the world or the refusal of some members of Congress to approve energy legislation that would begin to address the problem.

A comprehensive energy bill, which the Senate rejected by a narrow margin late last year, is expected to come up for another vote early this month.

Among other things it gives the go-ahead to drill for oil and natural gas in some potentially energy-rich public lands in the United States that are currently off-limits to energy production for environmental reasons. It provides government funds for the development of alternative energy sources, including wind and solar energy. It encourages clean-coal technology and advanced nuclear power. And it offers important tax incentives for energy conservation. The measure shows we are serious about affirming our energy independence. It must be passed.

Business as usual is not an option. According to a recent study by the National Petroleum Council, American consumers will pay \$1 trillion in higher gas prices in the next 20 years unless new sources are rapidly developed. Today, natural gas is the preferred fuel for meeting escalating electricity needs.

More than 90 percent of new electric-power capacity is expected to burn gas. Higher gas prices already are forcing some industries, such as petrochemicals and plastics, to cut back on production and close plants. But the full effect of higher gas prices has not yet been felt. When it is, millions of factory jobs will be in jeopardy.

If we are to avoid dangerous reliance on liquefied natural gas from abroad, we will need to open up new gas fields in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and the North Slope of Alaska in addition to the Rocky Mountains. Gas production in such frontier areas, combined with relief from overly restrictive leasing and environmental rules, could provide an estimated 213 trillion cubic feet of gas — enough to last decades.

Those who maintain that drilling in protected areas will harm the environment ignore those more technologically advanced methods for oil and gas production that are already being used in the United States. Better techniques are making it possible to increase the amount of recoverable oil and gas in every well.

To even have a hope of reducing our dependence on foreign producers, the effort to increase domestic production must begin now. It's in the best interests of all Americans. And our leaders — the elected officials and candidates for office — need to begin recognizing this potential crisis and take actions to avoid it.

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