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A Crude Reality About Energy Independence

By Kathleen Parker

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What's in a name? A bit of deception when it comes to the American Clean Energy and Security Act.

A more accurate title might be: the American Clean Energy and *Less* Security Act.

To get to the bottom of what's wrong with the [1,400-page energy bill passed by the House of Representatives](#), you have to dig deeper than Canada's tar sands. And what you find there is just as sludgy -- and taxing to process.

Crudely refined: The greener we are, the less secure we're likely to be.

Meaning, we either can be green *or* we can be less dependent on oil from terrorist-sponsoring states. But under the current energy bill, we can't be both.

Put another way: The more we cap our carbon, the happier the Saudis are. That's because most Middle Eastern crude is more easily accessible and requires less processing than what we and our friendlier neighbors can produce.

If you don't know this, it's because beer summits are more fun than math. Herewith, a short course for word people.

Basically, the energy bill focuses primarily on stationary sources of carbon dioxide emissions (power and manufacturing plants) and would

do little to address mobile sources of emissions, i.e. transportation.

Since virtually all U.S. stationary sources use domestic energy -- coal, natural gas, nuclear, wind, solar, biomass, etc. -- the energy bill would do almost nothing about reducing oil or gasoline imports. Foreign sources provide about 70 percent of the oil used in refining gasoline and diesel.

In fact, new restrictions and associated costs would probably mean that we'd be going to foreign suppliers for oil more often rather than less.

The only way to be less dependent, obviously, is to produce as much domestic oil as possible. But even if drilling were allowed in the Arctic National Wildlife [Refuge](#), for example, the cost of retrieving and processing the oil could be prohibitive under new cap-and-trade restrictions.

The Waxman-Markey [bill](#), as the legislation is more commonly known, would require the United States to reduce carbon emissions to 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 and 83 percent below by 2050. As a Prius-driving, pro-seal, recycling, organic vegetarian, I'm heavily tilted toward saving the planet. But we probably ought not to pretend that this bill would make us more secure by reducing dependence on foreign sources.

Even Canada's crude creates problems under the proposed restrictions while seeming to solve others. As Matt Schlapp, a veteran of energy policy debates and former White House political director, describes it, Canada's oil is a sludge that borders on solid, which makes it difficult to refine:

"Let's just say, the days of Jed Clampett are gone. You don't just stumble across oil anymore. The easy stuff is gone."

To refine Canadian muck to a usable form that would meet new emissions standards would require extensive processing that carries its

own carbon dioxide freight. Because Saudi crude is easier to get to, it's more attractive in a world where carbon is expensive.

"We're giving the Saudis an advantage, in other words," says Schlapp. "Why would we want to do that?"

Meanwhile, the transportation issues remain largely unaddressed. The extent to which oil and gasoline imports *do* decline in coming years wouldn't be a function of the Waxman-Markey bill, but it will be thanks to initiatives begun by George W. Bush and implemented by Barack Obama, according to C. Boyden Gray, former ambassador to the European Union and pro-ethanol "green" Republican, who served under Bush 41 as special envoy for Eurasian energy.

One of those, the so-called [CAFE](#) (corporate average fuel economy) legislation, raised auto mileage standards by about 30 percent. Bush 43 also pushed through energy legislation in 2005 and 2007 that requires the blending of 36 billion gallons of biofuels in the transport sector -- or about 20 percent of total liquid fuel consumption.

"These measures should significantly reduce oil imports," says Gray. "But both CAFE and the biofuel legislation predate Waxman-Markey and would achieve much of the import-reduction security goals publicly associated with Waxman-Markey."

Although the bill would put refined gasoline consumption under the cap along with coal, natural gas, etc., the baseline for counting reductions is 2003. The reductions in oil consumption already required by the CAFE and biofuels bills may exceed for many years the requirements of Waxman-Markey.

In other words, it's not clear what more the oil industry would have to do under Waxman-Markey than is already happening. The bill has many commendable elements, but increased energy security can't legitimately be counted as one of them.

Now about that beer summit.