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## EDITORIAL DESK

## The Other Black Gold

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Published: October 3, 2005

HELENA, Mont. - AMERICA has a substance abuse problem, and Montana may have a cure.

It is easy to forget, but before the hurricanes bumped up already outrageous fuel prices, President Bush was forced to ask the royals of Saudi Arabia -- the country that gave us 15 of the 19 Sept. 11 hijackers -- to lower the price of oil so Americans could afford to drive. He was refused.

In truth, he had no choice. America is addicted to foreign oil, and like any addict we are at the mercy of the pushers and require an intervention. Montana, among other states, is trying to help America get clean by promoting a range of modern domestic energy strategies. Yet our biggest idea is actually a very old recipe: gasoline made from coal instead of oil.

Most people are surprised to learn that we can produce gasoline, diesel, jet fuel and other petroleum products out of coal. Indeed, the process was used in America as early as 1928. In World War II, 92 percent of Germany's aviation fuel and half its total petroleum came from synthetic-fuel plants. South Africa has used a similar technology for 50 years, and now makes 200,000 barrels per day of synthetic gasoline and diesel.

"Synfuels" have remarkable properties: they are high-performing substances that run in existing engines without any technical modifications, and they burn much more cleanly than conventional fuels. The synfuel process, which is nothing like conventional coal use, removes greenhouse gases as well as toxins like sulfur, mercury and arsenic. And the technology has other applications: a synfuel plant can generate electric power, make synthetic natural gas, and produce the hydrogen that many (including President Bush) believe is the energy source of the future.

Montana thinks synfuels make a lot of sense for America, especially since our state has 120 billion tons of coal, more than a third of America's reserves. That's the liquid fuel equivalent of one-quarter of the oil underlying the Middle East. Responsible development of even a small fraction of these reserves could give America control over the price of gas, dissolve the oil bonds that tie us to the Middle East, and create wealth and jobs that would remain on American soil.

Synfuel can also aid military security. The Department of Defense -- America's largest consumer of foreign oil -- has stated a desire to run all battlefield equipment on a single, multipurpose synthetic fuel. A Pentagon report released last year, which presciently warned of Gulf Coast hurricanes as a major threat to military fuel supply, says synfuel is ideal as a stable, clean, domestically made battlefield fuel.

So what are the drawbacks? The hurdle in making synfuel has always been the cost of production, about \$35 a barrel, more expensive than oil has historically been. But as we all know, times have changed. Yes, there will be significant start-up costs for private companies, but risk can be alleviated with long-term buyers like the military and with new federal loan guarantees. And while Montana will do its part to help with appropriate transportation and other public facilities, a stronger federal investment -- like the billions in annual subsidies and tax breaks big oil companies have long received -- could really kick-start the industry.

Once, our government made such investments. In the 1930's and 40's, the United States made more than a million barrels of synthetic gasoline at several test plants. But the oil industry persuaded Washington to abandon the research. Ever since, presidents and Congresses have been unwilling, or unable, to combat Big Oil and make energy independence a top priority. The pattern continues. Four years after 9/11, Congress and the administration have given us an energy bill that by the president's own admission provides no relief from foreign oil any time soon. Meanwhile, less-advanced nations are passing us by. China, Malaysia and Qatar are building large synfuel facilities; Brazil has a new generation of cars that run on any combination of ethanol or gasoline in a single tank, allowing drivers to use whichever is cheaper that day.

Like all Americans, Montanans are tired of this nonsense. We are tired of paying \$3 a gallon for gas, tired of watching third-world nations overtake us in energy innovation, and tired of supporting the kind of tyrants that young Americans have spent two centuries fighting and dying to defeat.

Synfuel, ethanol, biodiesel, wind power, solar power, hydrogen -- these are no longer dreamy ideas. They are now real and ready solutions, and with a national committment behind them, America can kick the foreign oil habit for good.