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Candidates prepare plans to lower energy costs

By Chuck Sweeny**RRSTAR.COM**

Posted May 03, 2008 @ 07:05 PM

With gasoline prices a key concern of voters, both U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, and Democratic challenger Bob Abboud are busy calculating their energy plans.

Manzullo will announce Monday a policy designed to rid the U.S. of its dependency on foreign oil by encouraging domestic oil production, which could include excavating oil shale, tar sands and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve. He favors tax cuts on gas and oil and will urge the OPEC nations to export more oil, something they've refused repeatedly to do.

Manzullo supports a summertime suspension of the federal 18.4-cent-per-gallon gasoline tax. Republican presidential nominee-in-waiting John McCain called for such a move and was joined by Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Barack Obama, the other Democratic candidate, scoffed at the idea, calling it a gimmick that would only provide about \$25 worth of relief over the summer while depleting the federal road fund.

Manzullo, however, believes that governments at all levels should reduce fuel taxes, noting that in Illinois, federal and state taxes alone are more than 60 cents a gallon.

Manzullo has supported corn ethanol production, but he wants to speed development of ethanol made of switch grass because it is more efficient. Corn-growing states' initial enthusiasm for ethanol has been tempered because a quarter of the corn crop is now being diverted for motor fuel instead of food, helping to raise grocery prices.

Manzullo also wants to encourage conservation by making the \$3,000 tax credit permanent for buying hybrid cars. Currently, the credit is good on the first 60,000 hybrids per model and make. That means the credit already has run out on the popular Toyota Prius.

One thing you won't hear Manzullo advocating is a windfall profit tax on oil companies. The problem with it, Manzullo says, is that it discourages domestic investment.

Abboud says America needs a real energy policy, not more tinkering. Like Obama, Abboud says a summer holiday from the gasoline tax is counterproductive because it takes money away from road and bridge repair while saving the average motorist no more than \$25. Local governments use gas tax money "to fix streets everybody drives on," said Abboud, the mayor of Barrington Hills.

"The reality is, if you do something to lower the fuel price, you're going to wind up in the situation where the oil companies will continue to raise the price," said Abboud. He'd make the hybrid car tax credit permanent, too, but mainly to benefit U.S. automakers.

Abboud is a nuclear engineer, and what he proposes is nothing short of revolutionary: He'd create the "American Power Authority," a public-private partnership to modernize the electric grid and build 100 nuclear reactors.

Why do that? Because the future is electric hybrids, he said.

Abboud says the first 35 miles we drive each day consumes half the oil we use.

"If you're able to fuel the hybrid vehicle with electricity from the wall outlet so that the first 35 miles you drive is on power from the electric grid, that is the equivalent of gas at 70 cents a gallon. It will take 10 years to roll over vehicle fleets to hybrids, and we do that by setting higher fuel economy standards now. We don't have to suffer performance."

Abboud also supports solar, wind and hydro power. He says ethanol is OK, because anything the U.S. does to stop relying on foreign fuel allows us to develop a more independent foreign policy.

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