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A national energy policy that makes sense

By Charli Coon

The writer is an energy and environment analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation. This commentary was distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

When is a filibuster an opportunity?

When failure by the Senate to cut off debate and vote on a \$31 billion energy bill gives members one last chance to govern responsibly.

It won't be easy. The \$350 million in tax-exempt bonds for "green" development projects would have to go. That would mean Syracuse, N.Y., wouldn't get its subsidized soybean-powered mall. And Bossier City, La., -- a town virtually awash in casino money -- wouldn't get its riverfront development project that includes an "energy-rich Hooters" restaurant. And Iowa wouldn't get its million-gallon aquarium.

Alaskans would have to be told that the \$18 billion in loans needed to build a natural-gas pipeline would come without federal guarantees of repayment. (As if a project that would deliver that much natural gas to a hungry American market has any real chance to fail.)

In Minnesota, residents would have to be told that a coal gasification plant will be built in the state only if private interests step forth to finance it.

The toughest task would fall to senators in the farm states of the Midwest. They'd have to tell their gasohol-producing constituents -- or at least the board members at Archer-Daniels-Midland and ConAgra -- that the federal government no longer will spend billions to drive up the price of gas, drive down the health of engines and prop up an industry that, absent huge subsidies, would fade into obscurity in months.

The same goes for solar, wind, geothermal and biomass power. Billions of dollars in subsidies haven't made them remotely competitive. We've reached the point where they need to stand or fall on their own.

Instead of the grab-bag approach, the two houses of Congress could get together and take this opportunity to switch its focus to strengthening our energy infrastructure, supply and security.

What would this mean? It would mean granting the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) power to issue permits for interstate electricity lines in bottleneck areas. This would go a long way toward preventing blackouts such as the one that blackened states from Massachusetts to Ohio last summer.

It would mean keeping the repeal of the Public Utility Holding Company Act, a New Deal-era law that prohibits power companies from investing in unrelated businesses.

It also would mean keeping a provision that would delay FERC's plan to create a "standard market design" for the sale of electricity on the wholesale market.

It would mean bolstering our security by opening energy-rich areas within our reach to exploration. Specifically, we need to tap offshore oil and gas resources in the Outer Continental Shelf, significant natural-gas reserves in the Rocky Mountains and 2,000 acres of the 19 million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge above the Arctic Circle in Alaska.

Some radical activists contend that exploration in ANWR would destroy the environment, even though 27 years of oil exploration at nearby Prudhoe Bay prove otherwise. Worse, they argue that there's not enough oil in ANWR to make it worth the risk. Nonsense. The mean estimate of ANWR's potential is 10.3 billion barrels. That's more than twice the proven reserves in all of Texas.

Somehow, we manage to drill for oil all over Texas and work safely around its 22 million residents. But we're told we can't drill in ANWR, where 1,500 people live in an area the size of South Carolina, staking out 2,000 acres of treeless plain, where temperatures fall to 70 below zero and 58 days pass each year without sunlight. Never mind that we could harvest the amount of oil we buy from Saudi Arabia in 56 years.

It doesn't seem to make sense because it doesn't make sense.

Politicians make responsible lawmaking much harder than it has to be. All they have to do is tell people that they won't, on principle, accept pork for their vote. That they will, on principle, demand an energy policy that emphasizes supply and national security over picayune special interests and government subsidies. And that they'll do this because plentiful, affordable energy—more than any other identifiable factor—leads to economic growth, higher salaries and more jobs. They should tell voters that to vote for anything else is to abuse the trust those voters have placed in them.

It's all they have to do. It might be tough the first time. But voters will get used to it. In fact, they'll probably come to like it.