

NOTE

The 'Clean Coal' Myth

S B writes :

Billions of dollars are being poured into developing Carbon capture and storage (CCS) to make it commercially viable. The big coal industry is loath to put much money into CCS for a very good reason. It is not so stupid as to fall for its own propaganda.

But maintaining the "clean coal" fiction is an increasingly expensive job. In Australia, the Rudd government has given A\$2.4 billion (US\$2 billion) for research into CCS - outstripping the A\$1.5 billion (US\$1.3 billion) given to build new solar power plants.

In the US, the cap-and-trade climate bill currently before the Senate gives CCS a whopping US\$60 billion from the Barack Obama government.

The problems for CCS backers include: CCS is unproven; appropriate storage sites are few; leaks from underground storage are probable; and it is prohibitively expensive.

It also wastes a huge amount of energy. In a 2008 report, Greenpeace estimated CCS plants would use 10% to 40% of a coal-fired power plant's total energy output just to keep running.

In 2007, Carl Bauer, the director of the national energy technology laboratory in the US energy department, told a government committee CCS could add "from 81% to 86% to the cost of electricity for a new pulverized coal plant".

According to some estimates, CCS would make power from coal more expensive than solar thermal and wind power. However, as the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) said on September 7, "it's not a reasonable comparison [...] because solar thermal and wind power actually exist".

Of the handful of demonstration CCS plants built, the results are stupendously bad. The largest pilot plant attached to an operational power station in Australia is at the Latrobe Valley's coal-fired Hazelwood power plant—the most polluting in the industrialised world.

The SMH pointed out that its A\$10 million (US\$8.7 million) CCS plant captures only 25 tonnes of CO₂ a day—a trifling 0.05% of Hazelwood's emissions.

Despite this, world leaders at the G8 summit in July, 2009 in Italy held up CCS as central to a pledge to cut global emissions by 50% by 2020, including 80% cuts for the developed nations.

The clean coal myth is useful to the wealthy elites because it provides an excuse to governments and the big polluters to avoid real action on climate change. Every dollar spent on CCS is funds that could be spent on renewable energy, public transport and energy efficiency programs.

However, some corporations are still searching for ways to turn the dud technology to their advantage. US energy giant and Fortune 500 company NRG Energy has found one way to turn a profit out of CCS.

Its plan is to ditch the irritating "storage" bit altogether.

NRG Energy has asked the US government for a subsidy to build a CCS plant. It intends to sell the captured gas to oil companies who will use it to pump into oil wells to boost extraction rates. Clean coal becomes ... more oil.

This will create "a revenue stream to offset a portion of the cost of the project", allowing it to prove "the technology's viability on a larger scale", the company sources said.

It's a good example of how capitalist responses to climate change so often turn into the opposite. To make CCS profitable, it may become necessary to use it to increase emissions from fossil fuels. □□□