

ENERGIZING KENTUCKY

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By Al Smith

The Mid-East Oil Embargo of 1973 was a historic “man on the moon moment” for the United States to transform its energy policies in a sustainable way. But we blew it. This was the opening comment of Gov. Steve Beshear at a Louisville conference last week in which he admitted that over reliance on our coal resources since 1973 has left us with a big due bill to pay in a state that has squandered some of the cheapest electricity rates in the country while doing little about investing in energy efficiency or promoting alternative fuels.

With worldwide coal demand spiking again, and coal companies advertising for miners in an economy shaken by bad news from Wall Street, Beshear never mentioned mountain top removal or other of the industry’s environmental outrages, but he warned that we are out of cheap energy, that coal leaves a very dirty “carbon footprint” which, along with automobiles, contributes to global warming. With climate change a national concern, there will be “carbon constraints,” meaning a carbon tax or some kind of brake on coal pollution, he cautioned, but the Beshear administration will offer a plan next month to focus Kentucky on an energy strategy for these times.

Like what? Well, more clean and efficient use of coal, conserving energy (sometimes termed “the cheapest fuel of all”), diversifying electricity (he mentioned nuclear power), reducing greenhouse gases, making the state a leader in green practices, and encouraging different transportation fuels—all of the above while ensuring “strong economic growth” and making Kentucky “the Energy Capital of the World.” (The governor is a politician, remember, not blushing to steal this line from his old enemy, the late Gov. Wallace Wilkinson who tore down a Lexington hotel to build a world coal center that never materialized on a site dubbed “the coal hole”).

Renewable energies, “while important,” were slighted. Because only three percent of our energy now comes from solar, wind, and hydro-electric power, they have “limited applications,” said Beshear, dismissing Tom Fitzgerald’s claim that there are significant opportunities, including some 40 MW of hydro-electric potential from existing locks and dams on the Ohio and Kentucky rivers. On the other hand, Beshear became perhaps the first Kentucky governor to praise environmental champion Fitzgerald publicly, then quoted him on the social and economic costs of heedless energy

decisions on “people who live downhill, downwind, and downstream, and some of them are hurting.”

Beshear spoke at the second of three policy conferences on energy styled as “Energizing Kentucky. They are sponsored by the presidents of the Universities of Kentucky and Louisville and of Berea and Centre colleges. Some community activists found his talk underwhelming, compared to that by Utah Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Jr. who said he drives a car that runs on natural gas and lives in a residence powered by windmills—which topped Beshar’s modest note that his wife Jane had installed low-flow shower heads and fluorescent light bulbs in the Governor’s Mansion. Huntsman, a Republican who also governs a state that gets 90 percent of its electricity from coal, has created a bipartisan panel of leaders who have given him 70 specific recommendations for reducing greenhouse gases. What Beshear’s new energy secretary, Dr. Len Peters will recommend remains to be seen, but UK President Lee Todd says he is a “first rate” mind and committed to “cleaning up our act.”

Todd and his three academic partners gave us an earful last week, beginning with New York Times columnist Tom Friedman who said he wrote his new book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* to urge America to “get its groove back” and lead a green revolution, possibly even inventing the technology to make coal truly “clean.” Lexington energy expert Tom Kimmerer warned that Kentucky faces a horrendous “sticker” shock when the “carbon tax,” in what ever form, shows up on the household bills, more cause to scramble for energy savings now. Another Lexingtonian, Steve Austin, a planner, said the gas bills to get to and from our schools and jobs are even higher because we distanced our homes from them with screwy zoning practices that leave us even more car dependent.

The academic partnership that put this thoughtful information together needs to stay together as a forum to promote a rational energy policy for Kentucky. The school presidents have the prestige and knowledge to command our attention, including, the likes of 18 state legislators in attendance last week. Meanwhile, I give Gov. Beshear a Pass Plus grade for that speech, mostly for those new words we didn’t hear from a governor in the 35 years since the Oil Embargo-- “global warming,” “carbon footprint,” “addiction” to fossil fuels-- but also for trying to lead us from energy denial towards energy reality –*Al Smith, retired host of KET’s Comment on Kentucky, is writing a memoir about journalism and politics. ##*