



November 16, 2005

Bayh, Lugar seek oil alternatives

In hearing today, Indiana's senior senator to decry risks to security, nature

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November 16, 2005

WASHINGTON -- Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar disappointed environmental groups when he began voting in 2002 to support oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge after previously opposing it.

But he also was one of only five Republicans who backed an unsuccessful Senate effort this year to mandate higher gas mileage as a way to save oil.

Today, Lugar, who drives a hybrid car, will hold a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he heads to draw attention to the problem of the nation's dependence on oil -- including foreign oil.

"In the long run, this dependence is pushing the United States toward an economic disaster," according to an opening statement Lugar plans to read at the hearing, "that could mean diminished living standards, increased risks of war, and accelerated environmental degradation."

While Congress has been hamstrung about whether to increase the supply of oil or reduce demand, Lugar asks "whether the political will now exists to commit to a comprehensive strategy."

Oil dependence is also on the mind of Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind.

During speeches to Democratic groups around the country this year while exploring a potential 2008 presidential bid, Bayh has faulted the Bush administration for not using memory of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to make the country more energy-independent through incentives for hybrid vehicles and other initiatives.

Bayh plans to join Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kansas, and Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., in introducing legislation today to help do that.

"Achieving energy independence is one of the greatest challenges of our generation, one that will impact everything from our national security to our economy," Bayh said. "It will take an effort on par with the race to put a man on the moon, but we must find a way to reduce our dependence on foreign oil so that America is prepared for the future."

Just months ago, Congress passed an energy bill that included tax breaks and other federal subsidies to encourage oil and gas production -- as well as energy conservation. The bill also requires the use of ethanol and other fuels created from agricultural products.

But environmental groups on the left and critics from the right doubt the bill would do much to decrease oil dependence.

"It was largely a missed opportunity," said Eric Haxthausen, an economist with Environmental Defense in Washington.

Ben Lieberman, an energy expert at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, said of the bill: "It's a little too early to declare it a failure. We'll give it a few years, and then we'll be able to declare it a failure."

Although the United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world's population, it consumes 25 percent of the oil.

The cost of importing oil makes up about one-third of the nation's trade deficit, according to Lugar, a scenario that he said is hurting the economy and creating a "troubling national security burden."

That burden includes less economic leverage to discourage Iran's nuclear ambitions, a Venezuelan government emboldened by growing oil revenues, and an increased vulnerability to a tumultuous Middle East.

Two-thirds of U.S. oil consumption goes toward transportation.

Congress, however, has rejected efforts to increase fuel efficiency standards. Bayh was among the senators who voted against higher standards both this year and in 2002.

The Bush administration has proposed higher fuel-efficiency standards for SUVs and minivans, a move that environmental groups say doesn't go far enough.