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Opinion

Central Coast could lead the way on green again

Around 1896, the country's first offshore oil wells were drilled from piers extending into the Santa Barbara Channel, a major technological advancement for oil extraction that served as the standard for the next half century. The economic boom that accompanied the new drilling transformed several small coastal communities into booming oil towns in just a few years. In the succeeding decades, Americans discovered innovative ways to use oil and its byproducts as the federal government encouraged drilling further offshore and on public lands around the country. This was a major factor in our economy growing to dominate the world.

On the other hand, what every President for decades has recognized as our "addiction" to fossil fuels has also meant that today we are far too dependent on foreign countries for our energy. That puts our economy at risk as oil and gasoline prices swing wildly with every twist and turn in Mideast politics and our domestic resources will not supply our thirst for oil. It also means our national security priorities are skewed and the burning of fossil fuels is literally endangering the health of our planet.

That's why a search for alternatives is so important. I believe the Central Coast can once again lead the way on innovative energy technology and I'm seeing evidence all around me.

UC Santa Barbara, for example, is home to one of the U.S. Department of Energy's new multimillion-dollar Energy Frontier Research Centers. Funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the UCSB Center is already mobilizing the enormous talents and skills of our region's scientific workforce. Companies like Transphorm, Next Energy Technologies and others are collaborating with the University, creating breakthroughs to make alternative and renewable energy truly viable as large-scale replacements for oil and other fossil fuels.

While we have a ways to go perfecting some technologies, cutting edge examples of others are being rolled out all around us. Last year, industry leaders Planet Solar and SolarWorldUSA – both headquartered on the Central Coast – helped the Santa Barbara County complete the largest installation of solar panels by any public housing authority in the United States. About fifty percent of the funding to complete the project was generated from federal sources.

The installation of these 7,200 new solar panels on over 800 homes across Santa Barbara County created good paying jobs, and will result in lower energy bills for families throughout the County for years.

Another clean energy project putting Central Coast residents to work producing clean, home-grown American energy is the California Valley Solar Ranch in San Luis Obispo County. The U.S.

Department of Energy is backing the project and once it is complete, the state-of-the-art solar modules will turn sunlight into energy that will power over 100,000 homes, making it one of the largest solar power plants in the world. And it will inject over \$300 million into our local economy.

The federal government's support for these efforts is proof the Central Coast has moved to the forefront of our nation's clean energy movement. My goal is to ensure we build on these successes.

While I understand that fossil fuels will continue to be a part of our nation's energy mix, I believe we must transition away from our dangerous dependence on them as soon as possible. We need to keep developing and deploying the clean energy technologies that will reduce energy consumption, save consumers money, and create thousands and thousands of jobs along the way.

Over 100 years ago some risk taking entrepreneurs staked a claim on some uncertain technologies to plumb the depths of the Santa Barbara Channel. The effort paid off.

Today we can update that story by harnessing the best minds and entrepreneurial spirit of the Central Coast and lead the way to a clean energy economy.

Congresswoman Lois Capps (D-23) has represented portions of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties since 2003.