

Coal: The future fuel of hipsters

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It's a little weird, but one of the big topics at the Cleantech Forum taking place this week is coal.

"Coal is going to be an enduring fuel source for the next 50 years, or even the next 100 years," said Kevin Skillern, senior vice president of General Electric Energy Financial Services. Skillern's comment was similar to comments from other attendees, and it's a reflection that, perhaps, some form of clean coal is inevitable.

The first factor, of course, is that there is a lot of it in the ground.

"Pennsylvania has 3 billion tons of coal waste and 27 billion tons of coal in the ground," said Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell. The U.S. overall has 28 percent of the worldwide supply of coal.

Second, the ability to burn it in a cleaner fashion is improving, at least according to advocates. CoalTek, one of the more notable clean coal start-ups, has come up with a way to remove water out of coal prior to burning it. The process makes coal more energy-intensive, pound-for-pound, compared to regular coal. The changes that occur in the coal as a result of CoalTek's process also attenuate its polluting power, said CEO Chris Poirier. Silicon Valley's Technology Partners and Draper Fisher Jurvetson have invested in the company.

The pollution that coal processed via CoalTek's technology still puts out a lot more greenhouse gases than other clean technologies, "but it is a massive reduction compared to the total environmental impact today of coal," Poirier said. Fifty-two percent of all the electricity from U.S. plants comes from coal-fired plants, he added, and those plants are not going to be shut down tomorrow.

Some companies are also looking at ways of turning coal into natural gas or liquid fuel. Large corporations and national laboratories are looking at ways to sequester carbon dioxide underground, which would make coal easier to burn at factories.

The public will likely view these companies and ideas skeptically, so it will likely be an uphill battle every step of the way. Many of the environmental problems in China can be attributed to coal. In the U.S., we all grew up with those happy-go-lucky coal country movies like *The Deer Hunter* and *Harlan County U.S.A.*

But venture capital is moving into the field. Coal companies also seem to be learning public relations better. Poirier comes across like a former fraternity president. He just doesn't seem like the kind of executive that would call out company goons in the middle of a strike.

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