

Broad options needed on energy, Vitter says

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Alternative energy sources are the future, and increased offshore drilling should be the bridge to get there, U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., told constituents Saturday. The response from the audience at a forum on energy in Gretna suggested that at least some local residents are ready for the future now.

After listening to presentations about the global oil market and the opportunities for opening more offshore areas to drilling, the audience perked up when Vitter introduced Bob Thomas, director of the Center for Environmental Communications at Loyola University, to speak about alternative energy sources.

"Yeah, you right!" one man exclaimed as Thomas took the microphone.

Oil consumption as we now know it has a "40-year horizon," Thomas began, quoting an unnamed oil company executive. As a resource, it won't vanish, but "we won't be burning it up in our cars. It'll be such a precious commodity," Thomas said.

Americans need to "get an attitude adjustment" about energy use, Thomas said, drawing nods of recognition when he compared the current challenge to World War II efforts such as selling war bonds, rationing food and collecting scrap metal that helped unify America.

"You know that this nation emerged and did what it had to do for national security," Thomas told the audience, composed mostly of senior citizens and older baby boomers. "It was a national imperative. Energy has become a national imperative."

Both Vitter and Thomas stressed the importance of developing a diverse "portfolio" of alternative energy sources, such as clean coal, nuclear energy, ethanol, biofuels and hydrogen power.

Rather than "picking winners and losers," Vitter said, citing the federal government's recent push to develop corn-based ethanol production, all emerging technologies should be free to develop in the marketplace equally.

"We can't drill our way out of this problem," he said. "I think we need to have aggressive incentives for new technologies ... but equally important, we need to have it broad-based."

Though no one in the audience directly criticized the idea of increased offshore energy production, which Vitter described as the "most important bridge" to a more energy-efficient future, most of the audience's questions focused on ways to access alternative energy sooner and more affordably.

"Denmark, Europe, they began looking at this problem in the 1960s and '70s, and now they're totally energy-independent," said Sevilla Finley, a Gretna resident. "I'm concerned that we're so far behind." "We need to get with the times," said Eileen Livaudais of Slidell. "The world is moving ahead, and we're lagging behind."

Despite a 50 percent state tax credit for solar power systems that took effect this year, on top of a similar 30 percent federal tax credit, many residents still cannot afford the hefty price tag for installing solar panels at

their homes, Barbara Van Calsem said.

Thomas said that because there are still very few solar panel installers in Louisiana, and few suppliers and manufacturers nationally, state government needs to aggressively court emerging green industries. The stronger the green infrastructure, the more affordable green technologies will become, he said.

"We have to lead the charge. If we accept the energy challenge, we will lead the economy of this world," Thomas said.

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