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Tribune editorial: CO2 capture lacks public support in ND

Feb 28, 2024

A recent North Dakota poll shows state voters split over the seriousness of climate change, and the majority skeptical of the effectiveness of carbon capture. This should serve as a warning to state officials who have been promoting carbon capture.

On Tuesday, the Industrial Commission voted unanimously to award \$300,000 to a firm to help promote the capture, storage and use of carbon dioxide in the state. The funding was authorized in House Bill 1014.

A group of 17 legislators and one former legislator asked the commission not to award the money. Some members of the group voted for HB 1014 and now say they regret the vote. They argue the state shouldn't be funding a public relations campaign for private ventures.

Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring, a member of the commission along with Gov. Doug Burgum and Attorney General Drew Wrigley, said the commission was required by the Legislature to award the money.

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Much of the debate over carbon capture has been fueled by the proposed Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline which would carry carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in five states to be stored in North Dakota. Summit has encountered a varying amount of opposition in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota.

Opponents are worried about pipeline safety, liability concerns of the pipeline crossing agricultural land, and the company's potential use of eminent domain to gain use of private land. Burleigh and Emmons counties approved ordinances to give them more control over hazardous liquid pipelines. The counties have asked the Public Service Commission to reconsider its decision that its authority overrides local rules. If the PSC doesn't reconsider, the counties could go to court.

The poll shows public sentiment leaning against carbon capture. The poll found 16% of eligible voters in the state believe carbon capture will reduce the impacts of climate change while 40% are unsure and 27% believe it won't work. The poll was conducted by WPA Intelligence in Washington, D.C., for the North Dakota News Cooperative.

The poll also found only 8% of Republicans, 16% of independents and 36% of Democrats believe capturing and storing carbon dioxide underground will reduce the impact of climate change. The poll also showed North Dakotans split over whether climate change poses a serious threat.

Burgum can't consider carbon capture as popular among North Dakota residents. Hiring a public relations firm to sell the concept to North Dakotans could backfire. Opponents of the Summit pipeline see the PR effort as more of an attempt to promote the pipeline than to inform the public about carbon capture.

North Dakota has invested a lot of money into carbon capture and sequestration technology. At the same time it has failed to get its message across to the public.

The Tribune Editorial Board has consistently argued that Summit needs to listen to the public's concerns. If necessary, reroute the pipeline and address safety and liability concerns. It should not use eminent domain. State officials also should heed the public's concerns.

Public hearings eventually appear like shams when public concerns go unaddressed.