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Competition Urges Innovation in Harnessing Hydrogen Energy

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By Bary Alyssa Johnson

Congressman Bob Inglis (R-SC) introduced to the House of Representatives earlier this year the H-Prize Act of 2006, which was designed to advance hydrogen technology as an alternative source of fuel.

The Act, which passed in the House this week with a 416-6 vote, authorizes the Secretary of Energy to award monetary prizes through competitions designed to address technical barriers in creating hydrogen energy sources.

"It basically directs the Secretary to offer cash incentives to people and companies for developing and demonstrating commercial applications of hydrogen energy technology," said a spokesperson for Representative Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), who co-sponsored the bill.

"The Act encourages the private sector to invest time and efforts to come up with a solution for harnessing hydrogen energy effectively and efficiently," said a spokesperson for Representative Patrick McHenry (R-NC), another co-sponsor of the bill. "The main focus is to further develop hydrogen technologies that could be used as a cleaner alternative to the more traditional ways we use energy, like gas and oil."

The modeling of the Act has been likened to the Ansari X-Prize competition, which is hosted by non-profit X-Prize Foundation. Last year, the X-Prize contest offered $10 million for the development of a low-cost, highly efficient space craft for use in the civilian tourism sector.

Hydrogen fuel-powered fuel cells were designed to provide a cheaper alternative to gasoline. U.S. gasoline prices,

on a per-gallon basis, are currently about 70 percent higher than they were a year ago, based upon Department of Energy statistics.

As part of the Act, the Secretary of Energy will host competitions to increase research and development of hydrogen energy sources.

These competitions, which will run through 2017, will be open to individuals, small and large businesses and universities. The Secretary is authorized to dole out up to $11 million in prizes each year between 2007 and 2016.

Entries will be judged and awarded based on criteria established by the Secretary of Energy, the Department of Energy's Hydrogen Technical and Fuel Cell Advisory Committee, the National Science Foundation, the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering.

Prizes will be awarded in three categories: advancements in hydrogen production/storage/distribution/utilization, hydrogen-powered vehicle prototypes and "transformational changes in technologies for distribution or production of hydrogen…which may include cost criteria designed to facilitate the eventual market success of a winning technology," the Act states.

The first two categories will be eligible for up to $4 million in prize money either annually or bi-annually, while the third category will offer a prize of up to $10 million.

"It's a 'pot at the end of the rainbow' idea," said a spokesperson for McHenry. "Instead of putting tax payer money into a bureaucratic system to develop something within the government, we're offering benefits to the private sector so that they can figure out the most efficient way to do this."

"The long-term goal is to try and advance to a hydrogen economy to lessen dependency on foreign oil," Representative Bob Inglis (R-SC) said.

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