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H-prize proposal by Inglis intrigues Capitol Hill peers

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WASHINGTON -- With most of Congress and the country occupied with soaring gasoline prices, lawmakers Thursday were intrigued by Rep. Bob Inglis' long-term solution to the nation's demand for oil -- a monetary prize for a hydrogen alternative fuel source.

David Bodde, director of innovation at Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research, told the House Science Committee that Inglis' proposed H-prize or any reward for developing alternative fuel sources would help solve the environmental damage being caused by reliance on gasoline.

The legislation introduced by Inglis earlier this month proposes the establishment of a prize competition to propel the hydrogen industry to produce a viable alternative fuel source. He proposed setting a grand prize worth \$100 million, with smaller prizes spread out over the next decade.

Rep. Judy Biggert, R-Ill., criticized the cost, saying it would force Congress to take money from other research projects.

Inglis said he would be willing to reduce the government's contribution to the prize fund to \$10 million if sponsorship from private sources was obtained.

Democratic Rep. Brad Miller from North Carolina suggested the creation of an "E," or energy, prize instead of a competition focused solely on hydrogen, echoing others' concerns about the viability of hydrogen as an alternative fuel source.

"Hydrogen is not a source of fuel," Miller said. "It is a method of transferring energy."

Inglis said he is open to encouraging other technologies, but he believes a breakthrough in hydrogen could be so significant it demands a separate prize.

Joe Pouliot, a spokesman for the Science Committee, said the committee is likely to approve the bill and send it to the full House for consideration by June.

Inglis said the commitment needed for this endeavor is akin to President Kennedy's pledge to land a

man on the moon in a decade.

"I think we should be very bold about this," Inglis said. "I did not sense enough awareness here today among my colleagues about how at risk we are."

Inglis said dependence on oil from countries like Iran, Nigeria, Chad and Venezuela is an underestimated threat.

"We've spent \$400 billion in Iraq. We are talking about spending \$10 million," he said. "How much would we spend in Iran if they cut off our oil?"

Inglis said he sees one "blessing in the curse" of high gasoline prices -- it forces people to think.

"If gas hits \$4 a gallon -- we will have a stampede for an alternative fuel," Inglis said.

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