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All eyes on the 'H-prize'

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A powerful contingent from the academic, automotive and energy sectors descended on the office of an Upstate congressman this week to brainstorm incentives the federal government can offer to spur America's transition into a hydrogen economy.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis calls it the "H-Prize."

"I'm hoping, over the weeks to come, we get additional feedback from the participants about what a prize would look like," Inglis, R-S.C., said from his Washington office. "What I concluded was that a prize seems to make sense as a means of inspiring the public, and involving many, many participants who could help us accelerate the drive to the hydrogen economy."

Inglis has become an enthusiastic supporter of hydrogen -- primarily for powering automobiles, but perhaps eventually for heating homes and beyond -- and calls it his office's No. 1 priority. He's chairman of the House Science Committee's Research Subcommittee and co-chairs the House Hydrogen and

Fuel Cell Caucus.

The combined influence of the nearly 30 experts attending Inglis' panel is formidable.

The list includes representatives of automotive leaders like General Motors, Toyota and DaimlerChrysler; researchers from the University of South Carolina's fuel cell program and Clemson University; and others ranging from General Electric to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, an arm of the Defense Department.

"It's very encouraging that people like a congressman are looking at this issue," said Bill Thayer, vice president of Silicon Valley-based Ion America, a startup fuel-cell company.

"You've got to have that leadership at a very senior level, all the way up to George Bush himself. Generally, I don't know if the American public is fully aware on how dependent we are on foreign oil."

Federal incentives discussed include cash prizes; guaranteed purchase orders for a certain number of products; a commitment to supply the necessary support, like hydrogen refueling stations, similar to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Hydrogen Highway Initiative; or creating a prestigious industry award, like the Baldrige Award given out by the National Institute for Standards and Technology.

The idea is that prizes help lead to new technology and market breakthroughs.

DARPA has offered a cash prize in its "Grand Challenge" among universities and corporations to create an autonomous ground vehicle that can one day be used to save lives on the battlefield. That agency had enough ideas on the cutting room floor to spark other breakthroughs, Inglis said.

Initially, Inglis said he believed creating a car that could run 300 miles on a tank of hydrogen and be durable enough to last 100,000 miles would be worthy of a prize.

But companies want to be sure that once they mass-produce hydrogen cars, consumers will have easy access to fueling stations. Others want to be sure that they have buyers already lined up.

So the potential prize list grew.

"We certainly support the idea of recognition and awareness of hydrogen at the national level," Shell Hydrogen president Phil Baxley said in a statement.

"The more smart people who are looking at this and trying to solve it, the better off we're going to be," Thayer said from Silicon Valley. "If the H-Prize does that ... it's probably done its job."

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