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House panel reviews prize for developing hydrogen fuel *Inglis puts proposal before committee*

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WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Congress spent most of the week focused on the fuel of widespread anger and anxiety: the rising price of gasoline.

But Rep. Bob Inglis and the House Science Committee spent Thursday focused on Inglis' proposal to create a taxpayer-funded prize that would spur scientists' competitive juices and public buzz to make hydrogen a future alternative to oil.

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The committee reviewed a bill by Inglis, R-SC,, that would offer several federally funded prizes, including a grand prize of up to \$100 million, to spur scientific breakthroughs to overcome the production costs, storage issues and distribution problems that make hydrogen impractical for wide-scale commercial use. The grand prize would be in two parts: \$10 million in federal money plus a federal match for up to \$90 million in private investment money.

The idea of using hydrogen as a fuel has been around since the 19th century. It is expensive to separate hydrogen from water or hydrocarbons contained in other fuels. Fuel cells combine hydrogen and oxygen to generate electricity.

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During a hearing on Inglis' proposal, several committee members said he might have to settle for a smaller grand prize given the tight federal budget.

Inglis, chairman of the Science subcommittee on research, said he hoped to tap "the can-do American spirit" by offering incentives. He noted that competitive prizes have often caught the public's imagination and prodded the creative or the adventurous to step forward. For example, Charles Lindbergh flew nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean to capture the \$25,000 Orteig Prize. His success helped the fledgling aviation industry take off.

Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., called the Inglis bill "carefully crafted both to encourage ongoing work that can lead to incremental improvements in hydrogen technology and to draw more scientists and engineers into trying to remove the highest hurdles on the hydrogen highway."

But Rep. Judy Biggert, chairwoman of the Science subcommittee on energy, questioned the idea of federal prize money for research into a field that some analysts say could become a trillion-dollar business.

"Isn't that enough of an incentive?" Biggert, R-Ill., asked.

Witnesses at a hearing on Inglis' proposal said the private sector has a role to play but so does the federal government.

Phillip Baxley, president of Shell Hydrogen, said the 7-year-old business unit of oil giant Shell has invested in hydrogen research and development.

"But we can't do it all," Baxley said, adding his industry would be interested in putting up private money to supplement any federal prize.

David Bodde, innovation and public policy director at Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research, said an H-Prize "could do so much to accelerate this greatly needed transition from petroleum to a hydrogen economy."

Federal involvement would signal to the public, the energy industry and others that making hydrogen commercially viable is a priority, said Peter Diamandis, chairman of the X Prize Foundation, which provided the \$10 million, privately funded Ansari X Prize that led to the first private space flight in 2004.

The foundation is working with NASA on several federal prizes related to space and expects to manage a \$2.5 million prize NASA will announce next week, Diamandis said.

"Creating and managing successful inducement prizes is much harder than it looks," he said. "Prizes must not be about technology alone. They must be structured to create and follow heroes, have dramatic and demonstrable conclusions and must be something the public and media are made to care about."
