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House OKs Inglis' 'H-Prize' plan

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WASHINGTON -- The House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed legislation on Wednesday creating the "H-Prize," a \$10 million award to spur the production of a hydrogen-fueled car suitable for mass production.

The bill, introduced last month by Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., passed the House by a roll call vote of 416-6. A similar bill co-sponsored by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., is expected to be introduced in the Senate today. The Bush administration has indicated it supports the legislation.

The measure provides \$10 million in federal money for a grand prize as well as several smaller prizes that will be awarded every other year.

If no one wins the prize in 10 years, it will expire. An additional \$40 million in private funding will be sought to boost the overall prize.

In theory, a car fueled by hydrogen produces no emissions but water.

"Hydrogen may be the Holy Grail of transportation fuels," said Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., chairman of the House Science Committee. "It's a tall order, but it is the type of long-range effort we need."

Inglis said developing hydrogen as an alternative fuel source is a triple play: it boosts national security by reducing dependence on oil, creates new jobs and cleans the air.

Not to be mistaken as a prize for a science project, Inglis said the overall award would only be given to a car that could viably reach the market.

The H-Prize was modeled after the X-Prize, a privately funded reward for achievements in entrepreneurial flights to space.

Driving a hydrogen car is no different than a gas-fueled car -- except it is a lot quieter, according to Rep. Dan Lipinski D-Illinois, the chief co-sponsor of the bill.

Lipinski recently drove a prototype hydrogen-fueled car on the streets of the nation's capital. The car's price tag -- \$1.5 million -- is a "significant problem to work out," Lipinski said.

David Bodde of Clemson University said the prize would stimulate the industry and "bring new people into the game." Bodde is hopeful that some of his own students will compete.

Although a full transition from gas-fueled cars to hydrogen could be 15 or 20 years away, Bodde said the technology could be available in the next decade.

The main hurdle to overcome is finding a way to store hydrogen in the car, because a pressurized gas-type tank would be problematic and could easily leak, Bodde said.

South Carolina is "poised to lead" the country toward a hydrogen economy, Inglis said. Research in hydrogen is conducted in several of the state's educational institutions, including the University of South Carolina and Clemson University

In fact, researchers at Savannah River National Laboratory have made advances by storing hydrogen in cartridges similar to the way ink is stored for printers, Inglis said.

He hopes the prize will spur other unconventional storage methods.

This is the first piece of legislation written by Inglis to be passed on the House floor during this session of Congress.

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