

Pitching natural gas

By Pam Sohn
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Businessman T. Boone Pickens sits in the middle of the stage during Thursday's Manufacturing Summit. The national manufacturing conference was held at the Northwest Georgia Trade & Convention Center in Dalton, Ga., on Thursday. Leaders from the manufacturing and work force development fields attended the conference, which included Pickens as a keynote speaker. Staff Photo by Jake Daniels, Chattanooga Times Free Press

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DALTON, Ga. — T. Boone Pickens, the 82-year-old billionaire who has been called the “oracle of oil,” is predicting the price of gasoline will go up before the end of the year because of all the unrest in the Middle East.

As the keynote speaker at Dalton's Manufacturing Summit on Thursday, Pickens told attendees the increase will be just one more reason to begin adapting 18-wheelers and public vehicles to run on natural gas. That change is the keystone of Pickens' new energy plan to free America from its dependence on foreign oil.

“We use 28 million barrels of oil a day, but we only produce 7 million barrels a day of our own. And we import 13 million barrels [a day] from our enemies,” he said. “That is what I want to change. This country has to have an energy policy.”

Known to most Americans as the Texas oil man who several years ago pushed wind farms for energy independence, Pickens has a new plan of mining natural gas in the United States.

The new plan, which he calls “a bridge to the future” when renewables such as wind will be more financially viable, is not winning him many friends — either in environmental circles or in political rallies.

Cathie Bird is with Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment, formerly Save Our Cumberland Mountains.

Bird said she is disappointed with any energy plan that does not focus on renewable energy.

“I think there should be strong questions about investing any money into something that's going to run out,” she said. “And I definitely have a problem with fracking.”

Fracking is short for hydrofracturing, a method of gas mining that uses millions of gallons of water with hundreds of chemicals to speed or enhance the drilling process.

Bird said the federal Clean Water Act includes a loophole that exempts gas drillers from having to disclose what chemicals they're forcing into drilling holes to pry open cracks in the rock as they seek gas.

Fracking opponents say the chemicals can escape into groundwater and drinking water supplies, as happened in an April 27 natural gas well blowout in Pennsylvania. Some states and foreign countries are looking at heavily regulating or banning the practice.

On the political side, at least two Republican freshmen earlier this week took aim at Pickens' plan, which includes proposed legislation called “New Alternative Transportation to Give Americans Solutions Act,” or NAT GAS Act. The bill would provide \$5 billion in tax credits to fleet owners investing in vehicles that run on natural gas.

The freshmen, Mike Pompeo of Kansas and Raul Labrador of Idaho, claim the bill could hurt “free market” business.

“If you think OPEC is free market, you are badly missing the point,” Pickens chided them in his Dalton speech.

Pickens said he is not worried about either of those factions, nor is he worried about making more enemies in the Mideast when those nations lose income from America.

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"I see it as a security issue. I don't care about trade issues," he said.

Pickens appealed to the businessmen and women at the Dalton Manufacturing Summit and to the public to help him lobby Congress for the NAT GAS Act, a bipartisan bill introduced in April by Rep. John Sullivan, R-Okla.

"All I want is about a billion a year for five years," he said. "We pay OPEC every day. This is a mission for me, and I'm going to get it done."

The \$1 billion would help fleet owners switch their vehicles to natural gas. Operating costs would shrink, he said, and natural gas would be 30 percent cleaner than diesel.

It seems to be a mission that many in the audience took to heart.

Bob Kinard, owner of Kinard Realty in North Georgia, said Pickens was "awesome."

"[His idea is] so logical and so easy, it's hard for me to understand why the bureaucrats haven't taken it up," Kinard said.

Jack Smith, a member of the Gilmer County Tea Party, said he, too, was impressed.

"I think that what he was pointing out was very true. The United States is in a position where we must become much more self-sufficient in our energy," he said. "I might question a little bit about subsidies. I'm not one of those who believes the government should subsidize private enterprise."

Pickens left the stage of the Dalton Convention Center to a standing ovation. Later he told reporters who asked if he would profit from the plan that he already has invested \$82 million "from my own pocket" in trying to shake free the county's dependence on foreign oil.

He also said fracking can be and, in some places, is being done safely and cleanly.

"But I'm not doing this for green energy," he told reporters. "I'm just a patriotic old man."

Staff writer Harrison Keely contributed to this story.