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Getting to clean coal

COAL IS the big, dirty secret of the nation's — and world's — energy future. For all its pollutants, it is plentiful and proving adaptable as a raw material for gas fuels. Now a Cambridge-based company has announced plans for a demonstration plant in the town of Somerset that could turn coal into relatively clean-burning natural gas at half the cost.

Since Massachusetts depends on natural gas both for power generation and for heating buildings, this is important news. But some environmentalists are turning thumbs down on GreatPoint's plan and the \$100,000 grant it has received for work with biomass from the state's Renewable Energy Trust Fund. They argue that investments in coal gasification are unwise until there is a foolproof method of sequestering the carbon dioxide that is produced in the process.

Sequestering the greenhouse gas CO₂ is crucial. But opposing the project on this ground is a classic case of making the perfect the enemy of the good.

The company uses a patented catalyst that reacts with coal and steam in a reactor to yield natural gas and nonhazardous solid waste byproducts. GreatPoint's chief executive, Andrew Perlman, said the technology can work with other carbon feedstocks, including wood waste or switchgrass. He said

the emissions produced by the facility in Somerset would roughly equal those of a low-rise suburban office building.

Once the process proves itself, it would be used in Western states with large coal reserves. In that region, oil companies actually pay for carbon dioxide, which they pump into oil wells to enhance recovery of that fuel. So far, Perlman said, this is the most proven form of sequestration.

The gas that GreatPoint would produce is pipeline-grade natural gas, much higher quality than the "town gas" ordinarily produced from coal. If GreatPoint's technology is successful, it could be of use in China, with its huge reserves of highly polluting coal burned in conventional power plants. Perlman said that China each week opens a coal-burning power plant equal to Somerset's big multifuel generating plant at Brayton Point.

By all means, the state should be investing in the cleanest energy of all, the "nega-watts" of conservation and improved efficiency, and in wind and solar. But it also makes sense to invest in technologies that could produce a fuel as relatively clean as natural gas from biomass, at less cost than the gas the region is now using. That's especially the case if the same technology can transform coal from being a big part of the climate change problem into a major part of its solution.