

'Clean' coal may be fuel of the future

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THE Australian coal industry - the world's biggest exporter - is moving to ensure its future is not destroyed by increasing concerns about greenhouse gas emissions and the wide application of the Kyoto protocols.

This week a conference in Sydney was told about new technologies that would result in coal competing in the world's energy markets long after supposedly cleaner alternatives, such as natural gas, have been exhausted.

Often portrayed as a spoiler on greenhouse, the coal industry is leading the charge to promote the demonstration and early uptake of these technologies in Australia.

At current rates of extraction Australia's known coal reserves could last 260 years.

Coal companies, mindful of their position among the nation's key export earners, are well aware of the impact international pressure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions would have on the nation's living standards.

The Australian Coal Association has been working with government and scientific organisations to develop clean-coal technology.

Association executive director Mark O'Neill said the debate about what to do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions has focused on moving away from fossil fuels.

But in recent times attention had shifted to the concept of clean coal as a viable and possibly lower-cost option.

"Instead of burning coal directly, the so-called clean-coal power-generating systems first convert coal into gas (gasification) before using the gas in turbines to produce electricity," he said.

He told the conference technologies to capture resulting carbon dioxide emissions and then bury or "sequester" them deep within the Earth's crust were in an advanced stage of development.

"The increasing focus on clean-coal technologies is a sign that the greenhouse debate is maturing," Mr O'Neill said.

"As policy makers have turned their attention from negotiating international policy frameworks like Kyoto, to the task of actually reducing emissions, the magnitude and potential cost of the challenge has become clearer."

Nonetheless, Mr O'Neill pointed out there was now a realisation it would take decades, not years, before alternatives like renewables could provide more than a fraction of the world's growing energy needs.

Member companies of the association, who between them produce 98 per cent of Australia's black coal, have come together behind an ambitious program to develop a national clean-coal plan for Australia.

"We are involving all the key players from federal and state governments, the research community and the coal and electricity industries in the process," Mr O'Neill said.

The program, dubbed COAL21, aims to have zero emission technologies for coal widely available by 2021.

Federal Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane recently announced the full backing of the Government for the program, a move welcomed by Mr O'Neill, who said the minister had been instrumental in moving the agenda forward, being among the first to recognise the potential benefits of clean coal as a first response to climate change.