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Rural Florida holds the key to a clean energy future

By John Alexander and Howell Ferguson, special to the St. Petersburg Times

Recent events — including the catastrophic Deepwater Horizon oil spill now polluting the gulf and the brazen Times Square bombing attempt — bring into sharp focus the need to transform our national energy policy.

We currently import the majority of our oil from volatile regions of the world while spending billions protecting shipping lanes and oil facilities. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are being waged, at least in part, to guarantee supplies of oil from these unstable regions. The United States sent \$165 billion to the Middle East between 2007 and 2009 to meet our oil demand.

In response to these challenges, a dramatic new plan for addressing the country's antiquated energy policy has been unveiled in the U.S. Senate. The American Power Act would foster new economic activity and jobs, greater energy independence and cleaner power for Americans. And according to the nonpartisan Peterson Institute of International Economics, families will see a \$35 net decrease in energy costs annually through 2030. In particular, the bill holds special promise for Floridians.

To change the national energy picture, we must aggressively pursue innovative

solutions. One of our most valuable assets in working toward a sustainable energy future can be found all around us here at home — America's open, productive land.

Our working forests and agricultural lands can produce sustainable, renewable biofuels while also serving as the first line of defense against climate destabilization.

The United States has more arable land than China, Russia, Australia or any other single country. Yet, as our dependence on foreign energy continues, we don't seem to value this blessing of geography as we should.

Florida's rural land base has experienced a fivefold increase in urban conversion from 1964 to 1997, resulting in the loss of nearly 5 million acres of some of the most productive agricultural lands during this period. If this rate continues, Florida can expect to lose another 1.3 million acres of working land to urban conversion in the next 10 years.

And as we lose this essential resource, we don't just lose its ability to produce food, sustainable fuels and climate benefits; we also undermine our economy. Florida's

forests alone sustain more than 230,000 jobs and inject \$16 billion into the state's economy each year. We trail only Texas in beef production from grazing lands, and Florida's economy is bolstered by a \$103 billion agricultural impact from 9.2 million acres of land that sustains 47,500 hardworking farmers. In the late 1990s, nearly 2 million visitors traveled to Florida's forested and natural areas, bringing with them nearly \$2 billion in revenue.

In addition to increasing domestic fuel supplies and reducing our dependence on foreign oil while reducing pollution, the new energy legislation in Washington has the potential to inject new capital into rural areas hit hard by the recession. It includes provisions to conserve working farms, forests and ranch lands that will help keep natural lands working and natural, while producing clean, renewable biomass fuels.

Biomass — crops, wood and byproducts from farming — can provide an important, new clean energy source. New forests can sequester the carbon emissions that threaten our climate.

Lawmakers in Washington have the opportunity to change our current national energy stance by specifically including and funding land protection provisions in the American Power Act. Today there exists the potential to jump-start a new, clean, land-based economy in the Sunshine State.

We urge our senators to improve and support this vital legislation, including the vitally needed funding for conserving our natural infrastructure — farms, forests and ranchlands. Florida's energy independence and economy depend on it.

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