

Echols: 'Alternative' means 'non-foreign'

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When gas hits \$5 per gallon, Georgia needs to be ready. That really is what is at the heart of my push for alternative fuel usage in cars and trucks. My allies for alternative fuels may have other reasons, including going "green," but for me, energy independence represents a national security issue, and we should take it seriously.

In 1973, when I was but a teen in junior high without "wheels" or the license to drive them, there was an oil embargo that rocked the world. France, like America, felt the impact of being dependent on foreign oil. At the time, France was getting 76 percent of its energy supply from other countries, and oil accounted for 84 percent of its imports. Unlike us, though, the French had a plan - which included building a set of nuclear reactors second to none. While we blinked after the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor incident, the French kept building. They developed 58 nuclear reactors that now provide 87 percent of their energy portfolio. Add to that 447 hydroelectric plants, 23 fossil-fired plants and 10 gas turbines, and the French have emerged as an energy giant.

I suggest we start planning. That means redefining the word "alternative." In my lexicon, "alternative" means "non-foreign." That can be anything from compressed natural gas to electricity to expired Coke syrup - as long as it is home-grown. We have a bountiful supply of natural gas for CNG, plenty of coal and sun to power electric cars, and some ingenious inventors out there who can figure out how to get from A to B on all kinds of bizarre products. We need them all because they all bring us a step closer to energy independence.

With a U.S. trade deficit of \$700 billion in oil alone, you'd think all Americans would see the light. When we observe yet another explosive Middle East political crisis that has the potential to shut the Suez Canal and send the price of crude oil skyrocketing, we yawn and just keep on pumping gasoline, hoping against hope. And since we don't have the stomach to drill in our own country, we need leadership who will help us all see a different future.

We need leaders like my colleague Doug Everett on the Georgia Public Service Commission. He's been working for a decade to make CNG more accessible to the general public. We need companies like UPS and AT&T that use hybrid and CNG vehicles for their Atlanta operations. We