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Bill Allows Military to Use High-Carbon 'Liquid Coal'

By [JOHN COLLINS RUDOLF](#)



An amendment to a major military spending bill before the House would rescind a 2007 federal law barring the Defense Department from using alternative fuels, like synthetic oil made from coal, that produce more climate-altering pollution than conventional fuels.

A bill containing the amendment cleared the House Armed Services Committee this month.

The military's [annual consumption](#) of about 120 million barrels of oil is not only an enormous cost to the federal government but also a strategic risk because of the volatility of world oil markets, military analysts have said. The Defense Department has a goal of obtaining 25 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2025.

As a result of the 2007 law, written by Democrats, a significant part of that effort is now focused on developing advanced biofuels like those made from algae with reduced carbon footprints. But the focus on biofuels has been criticized by Republicans, who argue that the strategic imperative of reducing dependence on foreign oil outweighs the need to reduce the military's carbon dioxide emissions.

Were the provision barring high-carbon fuels eliminated, the Defense Department could renew its development of synthetic oil made from coal — a process perfected by the German military during World War II when its access to oil reserves was blocked. The carbon dioxide emissions associated with coal-to-liquid fuel are roughly double those from conventional oil.

Citing the military's own acknowledgement of climate change as a national security threat, Daniel J. Weiss, director of climate strategy at the Center for American Progress, called for Congress to reject the provision allowing the procurement of high-emission alternative fuels.

“Congress should speed the development and deployment of significantly cleaner domestic biofuels instead of spending tax dollars on dirtier fuels that accelerate global warming, which will foster unrest in nations impacted by global warming,” Mr. Weiss wrote in an [essay](#).

Supporters of the provision, however, note that current law prohibits the Defense Department from buying crude produced from Canada's oil sands, potentially increasing fuel costs to the military — and its reliance on more far-flung foreign suppliers. Crude from oil sands is more carbon-intensive than traditional oil, but only marginally so, [studies](#) have found.

“At a time when American forces are combating terrorists abroad, it is especially necessary for the Pentagon to have the versatility to secure and develop alternative sources of fuel from a friendly ally,” Marty Durbin, vice president of the American Petroleum Institute, a lobbying group, said in a statement this month.

Earlier this year, the Defense Department's pursuit of experimental low-carbon biofuels was [attacked](#) as a waste of money in a report by the RAND Corporation.

That report was criticized by a top Navy official, who said it contained several misrepresentations and errors, including a failure to assess whether the military's enormous purchasing power could accelerate the development of affordable biofuels.

“We have come to some far different conclusions,” Tom Hicks, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for energy, said of the RAND report at a military conference in January.