

Wyoming Business Council recommends \$1.5 million for coal research facility

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A haul truck carries coal at Contura Energy's Eagle Butte Mine near Gillette.

The Wyoming Business Council recommended a \$1.5 million grant to Campbell County on Thursday for a research facility on alternative uses for coal.

The county is in Wyoming's northeast, the hardest-hit region of the state during the recent coal downturn. With experts predicting the continued decline of the coal sector, interest in carbon capture research and carbon products has increased. Local and state leaders are eager to support new avenues that may extend the lifeline of Powder River Basin coal.

The grant money, which still awaits approval from the State Loan and Investment Board at its meeting June 15, would pay for the cost of land and construction on a 4,000-square-foot research lab in the Fort Union Industrial Park.

The Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center will look into industrial and commercial products made from coal, in line with the governor's ENDOW initiative, which seeks new ways to use the commodity, according to a Business Council summary of the project.

The group seeking the grant, Energy Capital Economic Development, receives funding from both the city of Gillette and Campbell County. It sought matching dollars for the research facility from local governments but was unable to secure money given the downturn in the economy from a weakened coal industry, according to the Business Council release.

The University of Wyoming's School of Energy Resources promised a strong collaboration with the Innovation Center and with Gillette Community College.

In a letter of support for the innovation center, the vice president of Atlas Carbon, which operates an activated carbon plant that will stand adjacent to the proposed carbon research facility, said new uses for coal will be crucial to the health of the local economy.

"I strongly believe that if our community does not apply focused effort toward developing alternative uses for coal right now, we will be choosing a path toward an economic future that is poorer than what we enjoy today," said Jim Ford of Atlas.

Atlas Carbon was also approved for a large loan from the Wyoming Business Council in September, for \$6.5 million, to expand its plant.

Campbell County will soon be home to the Integrated Testing Center, a utility-scale carbon capture research facility attached to the the Dry Fork coal-fired power plant. The center is a private-public investment supported by the Wyoming Legislature and Gov. Matt Mead.