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Carbon product project's goal: Find better uses for coal than fearing it

By [Joshua Learn](#)

A planned Powder River Basin facility that will usher in the development of advanced carbon projects will provide a new alternative to the way coal has been used for a thousand years, its top executive says.

"A lot of people out there are terrified that coal is going to destroy their lives," Phil Christopherson, CEO of Energy Capital Economic Development, told S&P Global Market Intelligence. "But I think we're smart enough to find better things to do than just fear it."

He said that a thousand years ago, humans realized coal could be burned to heat their caves. Hundreds of years later it was used to heat homes. More recently, it has been used to move steam engines and power electric plants.

"But everything you can make with oil you can make with coal, it's just that nobody has taken ever the time to develop that coal refinery like they have oil refineries," Christopherson said from behind a desk replete with "Star Trek" memorabilia in Gillette, Wyo.

Christopherson said the Advanced Carbon Products Innovation Center [project](#) recently received a \$1.5 million grant from the Wyoming Business Council, and his company is applying for another grant of \$1 million to \$1.5 million from the U.S. Economic Development Administration. ACPIC will act as a kind of hub for pilot projects looking to turn coal into marketable products, providing electricity, water, power, natural gas and emissions controls.

The project's design should be ready in mid-October, he said, and Energy Capital Economic Development will be looking at bids for engineers by early January.

He hopes the facility, which will be in the Fort Union Industrial Park in Gillette on land formerly owned by a coal producer, will be complete in a year. Energy Capital Economic Development has already identified a client in the advanced carbon products business interested in connecting a pilot project to the facility, he said, and other potential clients could come through the University of Wyoming's School of Energy Resources.

Mark Northam, director of the school, told S&P Global Market Intelligence the facility will be a great stepping-stone for the commercial development of new carbon product technology.

"The big expense in developing new technologies is scaling them up and demonstrating their viability," he said. "It's really going to provide us a place to shortcut the development of new technologies."

He added that researchers at the school have five patents for products like carbon fiber already and are working on more, and that they aspire to plug a pilot project into the ACPIC facility.

"They are all far more valuable on a weight basis than coal. The trick is to be able to make them cheaply," Northam said.

Christopherson [supports](#) expanded coal leases for [Cloud Peak Energy Inc.](#)'s Antelope mine, which could benefit the facility's clients.

He said ACPIC will act as a complement to the [Wyoming Integrated Test Center](#), a carbon capture facility plugged into the Dry Fork power plant.