Some say an untapped resource could be the saving grace for Southern Arkansas counties and move our country toward cheaper and more domestic sources of oil.

We're talking about lignite, a coal commonly converted into electricity. But a proposal for Arkansas would mine the state's four billion tons of lignite and turn it into gas for our cars.

They're monsters of the mine, digging and dumping around the clock. It's Red Hills Mine in Ackerman, Mississippi run by North American Coal.

"We're down in the pit itself," Mine Manager David Liffrig said.

They started commercial work here in 2002, mining 3.6 million tons of lignite a year.

"We start working our way down like a layer cake in removing different layers of dirt, then coal, continue dirt then coal," Liffrig said.

There are six seams, or layers of lignite, a soft black coal converted here into electricity. But the idea for Arkansas is an alternative, domestic fuel source.

"Arkansas coal, from what I understand, is very similar in the way it's laid in geologically and so the process would be the same," Liffrig said.

Liffrig says most likely the same type of machines at the Red Hills Mine and jobs ranging from those operating them to mechanics and electricians servicing them.

"They are looking at salary ranges of $17 to $25 an hour, depending on skill level," Liffrig said.

Between mine crews and administration, there's 230 workers at the Red Hills site where training comes on the job.

Another big piece of the work here is the reclamation process, basically restoring the land after it's mined. This area here was where some of the first mining took place and here's how it looks ten years later.

The required restoration actually follows the mining process with mountains of dirt dug earlier smoothing out the surface; then seeding and planting begins.

"We want to put the land back to the original conditions, if not better," Liffrig said.

That includes water discharge testing meeting state standards.

But not everybody thinks life with the mine is better.

"I like the geography that we have and what they're replacing it with bermuda grasses, pine, there will be no diversity," Florence Fulgham said.

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"In the broadest sense the lignite coal strip mining should be opposed because it's part of a major effort by private sector, which has a vested interest," Fulgham said.

Today she admits her lost cause wasn't shared by many. But it's hard to let it go.

"I guess it still digs at me, but I don't know what to do now that it's there," Fulgham said.
Nick Walters says embrace the lignite for the economic impact.

"We've had the opportunity to get investment back with the mine. It's been a lifesaver for us," Walters said.

Walters leads the Choctaw County Economic Development Foundation.

He says the mine, and the accompanying power plant, replaced previous manufacturing losses in town with locals benefiting with good paying jobs.

"Their kids are in our schools, they worship in our churches, they're shopping at our stores and the impact of that is just enormous," Walters said.

Walters says tax revenues from this complex will soon reach close to $4 million dollars a year.

"Half will go the public school system, the other half of that goes to our county government," Walters said.

A future 25-bed hospital is in the works for the county taking advantage of a "gold mine" of sorts unearthed by those monsters of the mine.

Arkansas' lignite coal reserve is mostly in the bottom half of the state. Plans would include more than a dozen mines as far north as Benton and extending all the way down to the Texas-Louisiana border.

The next step is getting the state legislature to sign off on $3 million for commercial testing. About 50 lawmakers plan to meet with Gov. Beebe in about a week to discuss this.

There would be no power plant or coal burning at the proposed sites for Arkansas. There would be the mine site and mobile mini-refineries currently being developed at the University of Texas at Arlington. The lignite would be transported into the refineries to become crude oil in a chemical conversion process emitting mainly methane that would be captured on site. Then it's shipped off to companies who do the final refinement into fuel for cars even jets.

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