

Reporter's Notebook: Door closes for oil, window opens for geothermal

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For those who may not be familiar with geothermal, it is an environmentally friendly source of power that uses super-heated water from highly pressurized reservoirs 12,000 feet underground to create steam and move a turbine. The process generates electricity with no carbon emissions and because the water can be injected back into the ground, it can run in a constant loop.

Up until now, geothermal projects were done almost exclusively by academic researchers and the federal government. Few people remember, but U.S. Department of Energy grant projects in the 1970s used geothermal to provide space heating for the Falls Community Hospital in Marlin and Cotulla High School down in the Eagle Ford Shale.

Due to high drilling costs, geothermal was always considered far too expensive to be a commercially viable source of power, but that might be changing under current energy market conditions.

As many readers know, \$30 per barrel oil is causing layoffs and a lot of pain in the state's petroleum industry, but one energy sector's heartache might be another one's opportunity.

With state-of-the-art rigs idled across the state, 13-year low crude oil prices have substantially slashed drilling prices.

Because drilling is the number one expense for geothermal projects, energy entrepreneurs like Thermal Energy Partners CEO Bruce Cutright are hoping that 2016 will be a "breakout year" for geothermal.

Geological maps reveal that the best places in Texas for geothermal are located along the Gulf Coast and south of San Antonio where there is the potential to generate more than 2,500 megawatts of clean power.

This week's Energy Inc. takes an in-depth look at how Cutright's company has teamed up with Orion Drilling out of Corpus Christi and hopes to build geothermal power plants in Texas, the Caribbean, Latin America and across the globe.

Sergio Chapa covers the energy industry for the newspaper.

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