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Carbon Capture a Failure? Not So Fast

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The over-budget Kemper coal plant is less like a white elephant, more like an ’80s cellphone.

In last week’s article on Southern Company’s Kemper plant, Darren Samuelsohn lays out the rough road that carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology has followed. Samuelsohn’s reporting is sound—he gets the trees right—but the forest is nowhere to be seen.

It’s not surprising that today’s technology for pulling carbon out of power-plant emissions has limitations. New, highly complex technologies rarely come to market in perfect shape. Its growing pains are not only normal, they’re particularly likely given the wild swings in public and private support that CCS has received. In truth, CCS hasn’t received serious attention or investment in a decade.

You could think of today’s CCS as analogous to the DynaTac 8000x. This was the groundbreaking handheld, wireless, portable “cellular” radio telephone that Motorola launched in 1984. It was called a “brick” because it was more than a foot long and weighed almost two pounds. The reception was terrible because there was no national cellular grid. And at a time when pay phone calls cost a dime, this phone cost more than $9,000 (in 2015 dollars).

We know now that cell phones held the power to change the world in ways no one could have imagined. But in 1984, cell phone technology was brand new, lousy, and ridiculously expensive. If development had frozen in time in 1984, untouched by additional investment for a decade or more, now-hilarious commercials like this would have looked…well, flying cars come to mind.

In the energy sector, the U.S. has tackled this kind of innovation challenge before. We drove the development and commercialization of the catalytic converter for cars, mercury scrubbers for smoke stacks, and energy conversion from cow manure. We even brought solar cells down from the space station to be affixed to ordinary homes in every state in the nation. This kind of ingenuity and drive can certainly transform CCS, which is, after all, not exactly a mission to Jupiter. If we get it right it will work not just for coal plants like Kemper, but also for natural gas- and oil-fired power plants, large manufacturing facilities, and oil refineries. Not only is it doable, it is absolutely essential, because carbon-heavy fossil fuels are going to be in use both here and around the world for a very long time.

So yes, Kemper is behind schedule and over budget. And yes, other CCS efforts in the U.S. have come up short. But without these early-stage experiments, there will be no game-changers to follow. The companies and individuals who are bold and creative enough to take these early risks and make mistakes in the clean energy space should not be dismissed as

naïve Don Quixotes, tilting at, well, windmills. Rather, they should be celebrated as inventors and pioneers who are working feverishly on real technology with the power to save the world.

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