

# **In S.C., high-tech bet on hydrogen-powered cars may be move in wrong direction**

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The Obama administration's plan to cut research dollars for hydrogen-powered cars is not good news for South Carolina and its capital city Columbia, which just last month opened two hydrogen fueling stations and unveiled the state's "hydrogen freeway."

Taxpayers have pumped \$40.7 million in the Midlands region of the state alone into building a new high-tech economy based, in large part, on hydrogen and fuel-cell research, primarily at the University of South Carolina.

A spokesman for South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford said Friday the Obama administration cutbacks show hydrogen proponents in the state Legislature might be backing the wrong technology in the effort to build a high-tech economy.

Federal officials favor hybrid electric plug-ins cars -- not fuel-cell-powered vehicles -- to help ease the country's dependence on oil.

"Government should not try to pick the industry of the future," Sanford spokesman Joel Sawyer said. "We shouldn't be in the business of picking horses in this race."

But local officials say most of their efforts -- and those of USC -- have been on stationary applications for the pollution-free technology, such as generators, and might not feel the pinch of the cutbacks.

U.S. [Energy Secretary](#) Steven Chu told reporters Thursday the president will recommend that federal dollars be drastically cut for hydrogen transportation research because the infrastructure -- fueling stations and hydrogen production and transport systems -- is too costly and would take too long to develop -- up to 20 years.

Chu said the Energy Department will back other fuel-efficient, nonpolluting cars, such as [plug-in hybrids](#), in an effort to more quickly stem the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

The Energy Department funded \$160 million in hydrogen transportation research this year. Next year, under President Barack Obama's proposal, that funding could drop as low as \$60 million, said Shannon Baxter-Clemmons, executive director of the S.C. Hydrogen & Fuel Cell Alliance.

"This is a strange turn of events," Baxter-Clemmons said. "We are very close to the tipping point (making fuel-cell applications, including cars, commercially viable). To stop that now is a waste of taxpayer dollars."

The one bright spot in the news is that Chu told reporters the Energy Department should continue research into stationary fuel cells for applications like batteries or backup power sources.

Columbia Mayor Bob Coble said those stationary uses -- such as fuel-cell backup power batteries at Fort Jackson and the fuel cell-powered scoreboard at USC's new baseball stadium -- "are where our efforts and research have focused. That's where the short-term economic development is."

The mayor added: "I would agree with them that hydrogen cars are not a short-term solution (to the nation's dependence on oil). But we should go to Washington and make the case that not funding the long-term solution

is short-sighted."

USC officials said it was unclear Friday how grants for [fuel-cell](#) research would be affected -- which grants would be considered research for cars and which would be for other purposes.

USC recently announced a \$12.5 million grant from the Energy Department for hydrogen research, the largest research grant in school history. That grant was for stationary applications, school officials said.

The news also could affect Columbia's and the state's emergence as a hydrogen research and development hub.

Last month, Columbia hosted the National Hydrogen Association Conference & Expo, drawing about 700 attendees from around the world and 2,500 members of the public -- most of those to view and ride in hydrogen-powered cars.

As part of the event, Aiken County and Columbia also announced the opening of two hydrogen fueling stations, and S.C. Speaker of the House Bobby Harrell, R-Charleston, proclaimed the opening of the S.C. [Hydrogen](#) Freeway.

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