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Today the Port of Walla Walla took action to approve an option for the Wallula Energy Resource Center to acquire land for the potential development of a low-emissions power plant that would capture and permanently store carbon dioxide.

Located in a predominantly industrial district in western Walla Walla County, about 15 miles east of Pasco, the site offers excellent rail service, ample industrial water supplies, superb highway access and the Northwest's largest deposit of subterranean basalt formations that are considered excellent candidates for storing carbon dioxide. The site already has a nearby 300-megawatt wind farm, with ethanol and biodiesel plants planned for construction nearby.

If it comes to fruition, the proposed Wallula Energy Resource Center (WERC) would generate 600 to 700 megawatts of electricity using state-of-the-art integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) technology. The plant would have the same emissions profile of a high efficiency natural gas-fired power plant.

IGCC technology converts coal into a synthetic gas, while capturing carbon dioxide in the process. The clean, synthetic gas is then used to fuel high-efficiency turbines that generate electricity. The plant would then inject the captured CO₂ into basalt formations more than 1.3 miles underground for permanent storage. Extensive research conducted by scientists at the nearby Battelle National Laboratory shows that once the CO₂ is injected it reacts with the basalt and crystallizes into calcium carbonate, a mineral that permanently adheres to the subterranean basalt rock.

WERC currently is an early stage of development to determine the technical and financial feasibility of the project. One important part of that process is an effort to work with the Big Sky Carbon Sequestration Project and U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to develop a pilot project for carbon sequestration at the site. The project also will apply for Investment Tax Credits authorized by DOE to incent the development of clean gasification technology.

If all goes well, WERC could be in a position to file a permit application for the project by the end of this year with the Washington Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council. However, a decision to begin construction would not be made until permits were received and long-term contracts for selling power from the facility could be arranged.

WERC can help meet the region's growing electricity needs with a clean source of power generation. We are excited with the prospect of delivering the type of environmentally-friendly energy technology that is consistent with greenhouse gas legislation recently enacted by the state of Washington.