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# Texas GOP, Dems tried to solve a climate change problem together 10 years ago. Then it unraveled.

**James Osborne** | Dec. 10, 2020 | Updated: Dec. 10, 2020 3:35 p.m.



The Petra Nova Carbon Capture Project, which its owner, NRG, recently shut down because low oil prices made it unecnomical. Carbon capture and storage, however, is enjoying a revival.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesus, Staff / Houston Chronicle

WASHINGTON - The legislative session in Austin was nearing its end, and Texas Republicans and Democrats were coalescing around a bill encouraging the development

of carbon storage facilities viewed as critical to the future of the state's power supply.

Action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Texas' solidly Republican state Legislature might sound fantastical amid the current political debate on climate change. But in 2009, the creation of permanent underground storage for carbon dioxide was considered sound policy to Republicans and Democrats alike. Texas needed more electricity for its growing population, and plans were underway to build almost a dozen coal plants, which would have raised the state's already high carbon emissions.

"People were certain that producing energy from coal would require carbon storage in the long term," said State Sen. Kel Seliger, an Amarillo Republican who co-sponsored the legislation. "The bill got a good reception. We were at the cutting edge of an industry, and the vision was that it was a good idea wherever you needed the energy."

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That bipartisan consensus would unravel in the years to come, but the efforts of more than a decade ago laid the groundwork for an emerging carbon capture and storage industry that could play a vital role in slowing the pace of climate change. What happened, or failed to happen during those years, represents an opportunity lost, but it also provides lessons on finding common ground on what has become one of the most contentious and pressing issues facing humanity.

Texas was far from alone in the late 2000s in pursuing carbon capture and storage.

Whether it was oil and gas-producing states such as North Dakota or Louisiana, or midwestern states with large fleets of coal-fired power plants, legislatures in nine states passed bills creating the regulations and liability policies that would form the necessary framework for a carbon storage industry, according to a report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Driving the interest was not necessarily concern about climate change, but rather getting in on the ground floor of what was viewed as an industry of the future. In 2007, the George W. Bush administration had given a coalition of coal and power companies \$1 billion to develop a sprawling carbon capture and storage site in Illinois called FutureGen.

With President Barack Obama winning the 2008 election with a mandate to fight climate change, federal funding for carbon capture and storage wasn't going away.

“The framing was different. It was about strategies for sustaining these states’ energy economies,” said Brad Crabtree, a vice president of the clean energy think tank Great Plains Institute, who worked on getting legislation passed in North Dakota. “We were quite intentionally not talking about it as climate policy per say.”

In Texas, the former Dallas mayor and environmental activist Laura Miller was spearheading the development of the Texas Clean Energy Project, a \$2 billion “clean

coal” plant in a small oil town outside of Odessa

It promised to create 1,500 construction jobs and 150 permanent jobs, all while capturing 90 percent of plant’s carbon emissions. The carbon dioxide would then be pumped underground in the surrounding oil fields to aid in oil production.

And with its old, empty oil fields and vast saline aquifers, Texas had plenty of options for underground carbon storage, should Miller’s project succeed.

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Meanwhile, Congress was debating the creation of a cap and trade system to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a market-based approach that would have provided incentives to capture and store carbon dioxide. When Seliger’s bill [came up for a vote in May 2009](#), it passed unanimously.

“Laura (Miller) pulled in a lot of the Democrat members that would have otherwise been skeptical. And Seliger and the Odessa Chamber of Commerce brought in the Republicans,” recounted Tom “Smitty” Smith, the former Texas director of Public Citizen, an activist group. “A number of people, including myself, thought cap and trade was going to happen. So, there was interest in figuring out a way to make plants like this profitable.”

A month later the U.S. House passed what was known as the Waxman-Markey cap and trade bill, but Senate Democrats never managed to bring around Republicans, dooming the legislation.

At the same time coal was fast losing primacy as Texas's power source of choice. Hydraulic fracturing opened vast natural gas deposits, dropping prices dramatically. And developers were erecting wind turbines in West Texas at a fast clip.

Without cap and trade, Miller and developers in other states struggled to pull together the necessary financing for their carbon storage projects. In 2016, the Department of Energy halted payment on the \$350 million it had agreed to spend on the Texas Clean Energy Project.

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In the meantime, the politics of climate change became divisive, with Republican politicians such as Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick questioning the science of manmade global warming and describing the planet's climate as, "in God's hands."

More than a decade since the carbon storage bill passed, the Texas State Legislature has taken virtually no action to address climate change - with Republicans even blocking a bill to study climate change's potential impacts on Texas following Hurricane Harvey in

2017.

“Back then everyone was pretty geared up for carbon storage,” said Tip Meckel, a scientist at the Bureau of Economic Geology at The University of Texas at Austin. “But most people have forgotten all that happened, and a decade has gone by.”

Not that Texas and other states’ efforts to jump start the carbon capture industry were entirely wasted.

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In 2018 Congress passed an expansion of the federal carbon capture program, more than doubling the tax credit for carbon capture and storage. That has led to a renewed interest in storing carbon underground with close to a dozen projects now under development along the Gulf Coast, primarily in Louisiana.

Leading the way on that legislation were politicians from the states that enacted carbon storage legislation a decade earlier, including Sen. John Barrasso, a Wyoming Republican and the next chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and Rep. Mike Conaway, Republican of Texas.



“I realized a breakthrough back then,” said Crabtree, of the Carbon Capture Coalition.. “If (power plants shutting down) and transition is the message, for people who rely on current production, that’s a pretty dissatisfying political message. But if there’s technology that can retool your plant, and you can keep your job and have a good middle-class life, that’s a winning message.”

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