opinion

Bush has little vision

By Howard Geller
Guest Commentary, Boulder

President Bush again spoke of the importance of reducing our dependence on oil in a televised speech April 25. But his proposals for doing so fall far short of what should be done - especially when it comes to promoting energy efficiency and conservation.

One of the main shortcomings in the president's proposals is the absence of a national energy savings goal. The president could call for a 10 percent reduction in our nation's oil use in the short run and more in the long run. Setting such goals is the first step toward reducing our consumption of oil. Of course, such a goal needs to be backed up by meaningful policies.

In the absence of leadership from the president, some governors are starting to fill the void. For example, Gov. Jon Huntsman just announced a goal of increasing energy efficiency 20 percent throughout the state of Utah by 2015. If a conservative governor can set a strong energy efficiency goal for his state, why can't the president do so for the nation?

President Bush called for extending the federal tax credit on hybrid gas-electric vehicles. This is a tiny step for encouraging greater energy efficiency and fuel savings. Furthermore, not all hybrid vehicles are fuel-efficient. General Motors is planning to introduce hybrid pickup trucks that get only about 18 miles per gallon. The tax credits should be limited to hybrid vehicles getting at least 30 mpg.

Tax credits for high-mpg hybrid vehicles won't help most American families reduce their gasoline use or costs at the pump. And higher prices at the pump don't seem to be making a big difference in fuel use either. If President Bush really wanted to help the majority of Americans conserve gasoline over the long run, he would raise the mpg standards on cars, SUVs and other types of vehicles.

Doing so would push vehicle manufacturers to increase the efficiency of all their new vehicles, just as the original standards did in the late '70s and early '80s.

Raising these standards 5 percent per year over the next 10 years, to 41 mpg for cars and 33 mpg for light trucks by 2016, is technically and economically feasible. It can be done with better technologies such as hybrid drive trains and clean diesel engines. And it can be done without making vehicles less safe, contrary to the claims of the auto industry.

Moreover, it would save about 10 times as much oil as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge might produce over the long run.

President Bush also spoke about the importance of research and development on new energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies. But actions speak louder than words,

and the Bush administration's proposed budget for energy efficiency and renewable energy research and development and deployment programs in 2007 is 5 percent less than the budget approved by Congress in 2005. A few high profile research and development programs get more, but many are cut. For example, the administration has proposed cutting assistance to help low-income households weatherize their homes by $78 million, over 30 percent.

Given the serious energy challenges our nation is facing, we should be expanding research and development and promotion of a wide range of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies. Adopting a windfall-profits tax on oil and natural gas producers - companies that are realizing record profits while drivers are paying dearly at the gas pump - would be one way to fund increased research and development and promotion of new energy technologies.

A portion of the tax revenues also could be used to help families improve the energy efficiency of their homes, thereby reducing soaring heating bills.

The good news is that President Bush is talking about energy conservation and our nation's oil addiction. But he has a long way to go before he puts forward a meaningful strategy for curing that addiction.

Howard Geller is the executive director of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project (SWEEP), a public interest organization based in Colorado.