

Forum: Okaloosa must find ways to be energy efficient

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OKALOOSA ISLAND — With a continued focus on the environment, everyone from the private sector to the government is looking for alternative sources of energy to reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

Those issues were the focus of Thursday's roundtable discussion hosted by Okaloosa County's Economic Development Council.

Col. Bruce McClintock, commander of Eglin's 96th Air Base Wing, spoke about the impact energy costs have on the Air Force and what it is doing to find alternative energy sources.

McClintock said 81 percent of the Air Force's annual energy costs come from aviation fuel and that a \$10-a-barrel increase in price of oil results in a \$619 million increase in the Air Force's annual budget. Locally, the Air Force is looking at using biomass as alternative fuel to reduce its oil intake, he said.

"We do not want to be dependent on foreign energies because that is one way someone else has leverage on us," McClintock said.

Susan Story, chief executive officer of Gulf Power, served as the moderator for Thursday's forum and said the local energy provider was working on ways to increase energy efficiency and reduce its carbon footprint. Among the initiatives Story discussed were:

| Adding smart meters to customers' homes in the next three to four years, which will provide customers with more information on their power consumption and show them ways to better use energy.

| Creating a smart grid that will reduce energy losses as it is distributed and produce less energy while serving the same amount of customers.

| Shutting down one of their coal plants in Panama City and converting it to work with biomass.

| Applying for stimulus funds to research and test turning algae into diesel fuel.

"There's not a silver bullet. We have to find ways to be more energy efficient," Story said. "I think technology is going to give us a lot more answers in the next 10 years."

Thursday's forum also included representatives from the Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service, which oversees mineral resources on federal lands and waters.

Gary Goeke, chief of the environmental assessment section of MMS, tried to allay fears of disastrous oil spill if offshore drilling is allowed in the Gulf of Mexico.

Goeke said regulations have become so stringent that any company that drills has an emergency spill plan in place and the funding to immediately respond to a possible spill.