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DONLEY SIGNS POLICY MEMO COMMITTING AIR FORCE TO SYNTHETIC FUEL PLAN

Driven by a need for increased energy security, the Air Force this week unveiled a critical memorandum highlighting its commitment to using synthetic fuels on half of its stateside missions by 2016.

The Air Force's Energy Program Policy Memorandum 10-1 will help codify the service's desire to be able to buy a synthetic fuel blend for half of its domestic flights by the middle of the next decade. This is a significant step forward for alternative fuel-makers as the service is the largest consumer of energy in the federal government. In fiscal year 2007 alone, the service spent nearly \$7 billion on energy, of that \$5.6 billion went to aviation fuel, according to the document signed by Air Force Secretary Michael Donley on Dec. 19, 2008.

While the document lists numerous ways the service wants to streamline its energy use, the synthetic fuels effort remains a top priority as aviation fuel takes up more than 80 percent of the service's energy budget.

Key to this is the service's push to certify its fleet to fly on synthetic fuels "in order to support the primary goal of being prepared to cost competitively acquire 50 percent of the Air Force's domestic aviation fuel requirement via an alternative fuel blend in which [that fuel] is derived from domestic sources" that are greener than standard jet fuel by 2016, reads a copy of the document obtained by Inside the Air Force.

The future of the effort was in doubt last summer after Donley's predecessor -- and champion of using coal-based synthetic fuel in the aviation fleet -- Michael Wynne was fired by Defense Secretary Robert Gates in June. Wynne's point man on the synthetic fuel effort, William Anderson, resigned a month later claiming he no longer had the support he needed at the Pentagon to advance the alternative energy agenda.

These events were followed by several months of uncertainty as Donley conducted a thorough review of all Air Force programs. By September, the plan was given the OK to proceed by Donley.

While the overall synthetic fuel effort is on-track, the Air Force has recently put greater emphasis on fuel stocks other than just coal -- such as biomass -- to create synthetic fuels.

Now, Air Force officials "are advocating several forms of alternative fuels not just coal," reads a Dec. 23, 2008, e-mail from service spokesman Gary Strasburg.

This move comes after critics pointed out that coal-based jet fuel production emits far more greenhouse gases than petroleum-based fuel.

The service has long maintained that it would use only fuels that pollute less than current jet fuel -- even in the case of coal-based fuel.

Still, this acknowledgment appears to mark a larger shift away from the heavy focus the Air Force had given to coal-based fuel. Just last year, service officials went so far as to issue a request for proposals to build a privately operated coal-to-liquids jet fuel refinery on unused land at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana.

The timing of the document's publication fits nicely with President-elect Barack Obama's recent announcement that calls for the doubling of alternative energy production in the next three years. Having such a massive customer willing to buy alternative fuels will also help spur investment in that industry, Air Force officials hope.

The service's alternative energy push began several years ago, when concerns about instability in the Middle East and volatile oil prices prompted the service to start looking at ways it could become energy self-sufficient, an effort that has culminated in this memorandum. "Improving energy security drives the goals and objectives of the Air Force Energy Strategy," reads the document.

"Increased demand for imports coupled with dwindling resources and the instability in the Arabian Gulf region and industrial expansion worldwide, makes it clear that the need for an effective energy strategy is just as important now as it was during the oil crisis of the 1970s," reads the memo. "While great strides in energy conservation have been made in past years, a renewed commitment to energy conservation and energy efficiency is needed to reduce the growing dependency on foreign petroleum products."

The service also supports the creation of both a Defense Department and nationwide energy strategies, states the letter. -- John Reed