

Debate grows over exporting U.S. natural gas

By Simone Sebastian, Houston Chronicle

Debate is brewing over whether to keep the nation's glut of natural gas at home for cheap energy or export it at five times the price, possibly creating jobs and boosting the domestic economy.

Businesses that purchase natural gas for industrial and residential use have rallied against proposals to liquefy and export the fossil fuel to Asian and European nations willing to pay much higher prices.

Nine companies have sought federal approval to export about 10 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas per day, which would boost prices for U.S. customers.

Cheniere Energy's Sabine Pass LNG plant in Louisiana already has won approval to ship out more than 2 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas a day.

In total, the proposed export volume equals about 14 percent of the natural gas produced in the United States – 26.8 trillion cubic feet in 2010, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. The U.S. consumed about 23.8 trillion cubic feet.

There's little doubt that exports will cause the price of natural gas to rise. The debate is whether the rise in gross domestic product and gas field employment might offset the negative effects of higher domestic energy prices.

"I don't think anybody knows the answer to that question, which we think argues for slowing down these (export) facilities," said Dave Schryver, executive vice president of

the American Public Gas Association, a trade group for municipal gas utilities.

“Until you have a strong, accurate view of what the impact is going to have on consumers, it’s premature.”

The price of natural gas in the U.S. has plummeted as technology has made it economical to extract natural gas from dense shale rock.

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