

CRS Report for Congress

Underground Carbon Dioxide Storage: Frequently Asked Questions

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Summary

This report answers frequently asked questions about the geologic storage of carbon dioxide (CO₂). The questions are broadly representative of typical inquiries regarding the process and mechanics of storing CO₂ underground, how much might be stored, and what might happen to CO₂ once it is injected underground. Geologic storage is one step in a process termed *carbon capture and storage*, or CCS. Following capture and transportation, CO₂ would be injected into geologic formations that have suitable volume, or pore space, to retain large quantities of the captured gas. Currently, the most promising reservoirs for storing CO₂ are oil and gas fields, deep saline reservoirs, and unmineable coal seams. Preventing CO₂ from escaping would require careful reservoir characterization. Knowledge gained from over 30 years of injecting CO₂ underground to enhance oil recovery would be applied to storing CO₂ for CCS purposes. Given the complexity of most geologic reservoirs, and the potentially huge volumes of CO₂ that may be injected, risk of some CO₂ leakage over time may never completely be eliminated. A variety of techniques are available for monitoring leaks from a reservoir; however, the long-term (hundreds to thousands of years) fate of CO₂ stored underground is not thoroughly understood.

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Underground Carbon Dioxide Storage: Frequently Asked Questions

Many people are unfamiliar with the concept of storing carbon — most likely in the form of carbon dioxide (CO₂) — underground in geologic reservoirs. This report answers questions broadly representative of typical queries about why, where, and how CO₂ may be stored underground, as well as how much CO₂ might be stored. In addition, this report answers several questions about what might happen if CO₂ escapes from underground storage. The term *carbon sequestration* includes carbon capture and storage (CCS), but it is also used to refer to the biological uptake of carbon from the atmosphere through photosynthesis. This report does not discuss biological sequestration. Storing CO₂ in the oceans is another possible option for carbon storage, although currently not deemed as promising as underground storage.¹

Carbon Capture and Storage — Background

What is Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS)?

Carbon capture and storage (CCS) is capturing carbon — usually carbon dioxide (CO₂) — at its source and storing it instead of releasing it to the atmosphere. The first step in CCS is to capture CO₂ at the source and produce a concentrated stream for transport and storage. Currently, three main approaches are available to capture CO₂ from large-scale industrial facilities, such as cement plants, or fossil fuel power plants: (1) post-combustion capture, (2) pre-combustion capture, and (3) oxy-fuel combustion capture. Transportation of captured CO₂ is the second step in CCS. Pipelines are currently the most common method for transporting CO₂ in the United States, and would likely be used for CCS unless the CO₂ could be stored directly beneath the emission source. Injecting CO₂ underground into a geologic formation is the likely third step in the process, where the carbon would remain out of contact with the atmosphere.

Why is CCS of Interest in the Debate Over Global Warming?

CCS is attracting interest as a measure for mitigating global climate change because large amounts of CO₂ emitted from fossil fuel use could potentially be captured and stored underground. Most scientists have concluded that greenhouse gases (GHG) emitted by humans are influencing the global climate. Although natural events such as volcanic eruptions or variability in the sun's energy output also contribute to climate variability, scientists cannot explain the climate changes in the past few decades without including

¹ This report only discusses underground storage of carbon. For more information, see CRS Report RL33801, *Direct Carbon Sequestration: Capturing and Storing CO₂*, by Peter Folger; and CRS Report RL33971, *Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) Pipelines for Carbon Sequestration: Emerging Policy Issues*, by Paul W. Parfomak and Peter Folger.

the effects of elevated GHG concentrations from fossil fuel use, land clearing, and industrial and agricultural emissions.² Of all the GHGs emitted by humans, CO₂ is considered most important, in part because large volumes of the gas are released to the atmosphere each year. A large fraction of CO₂ emitted by human activities remains in the atmosphere; in fact, CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere have increased by one-third since the Industrial Revolution, from about 280 parts per million (ppm) in 1850 to over 380 ppm today.³ In the United States, fossil fuel combustion accounts for 94% of all CO₂ emissions. One-third of U.S. CO₂ emissions come from fossil-fueled electricity generating power plants. These plants may be the most likely initial candidates for CCS because they are predominantly large, single-point sources of emissions. An assumption inherent in CCS is that CO₂ will be stored underground in sufficient quantity, and for sufficient time to significantly ameliorate impacts of GHG-influenced climate change.

Storing CO₂ Underground

What is a Geologic Formation and How Would it Store CO₂?

CO₂ would need to be stored underground in *geologic formations*⁴ with characteristics that would trap large volumes of CO₂ and not allow significant leakage from the formation. Some of these characteristics include open spaces, known as *porosity*; sufficient interconnectivity between the open spaces so that CO₂ can flow laterally or migrate within the formation, known as *permeability*; and a layer or boundary that is impermeable to upward flow so that CO₂ is trapped underground. Many types of geologic formations have these features, such as sandstones and limestones, and some geologic formations are tens to hundreds of feet thick and may extend laterally for miles. Geologic formations that are potential CO₂ reservoirs may be analogous to reservoirs that trap oil and gas. Oil and gas can be found in sandstones, limestones, and other permeable formations, trapped for millions of years until tapped by wells drilled from the surface to extract the hydrocarbons. An overlying layer of low permeability, commonly referred to as a *caprock* or *geologic seal* (such as shales or siltstones), prevents oil and gas, and would prevent CO₂, from migrating out of the permeable formation.

Other types of geologic formations may possess characteristics that could trap CO₂ underground. For example, coal beds are commonly porous and permeable and are viewed as potential reservoirs for storing CO₂. In addition, methane gas — which forms naturally from the coal — often remains bound to the organic molecules within the coal seam. Experiments have shown that coal also can bind CO₂ to its mineral surfaces, and the organic molecules may actually prefer to trap CO₂ instead of the naturally occurring methane. Other types of geologic formations, known as black shales, also possess this

² For more information on the science of climate change, see CRS Report RL33849, *Climate Change: Science and Policy Implications*, by Jane A. Leggett.

³ For more information on why CO₂ concentrations are increasing in the atmosphere, see CRS Report RL34059, *The Carbon Cycle: Implications for Climate Change and Congress*, by Peter Folger.

⁴ A geologic formation refers to a body of rock, igneous, metamorphic, or sedimentary that can be identified by its geologic characteristics (e.g., types of minerals, age, chemical composition) and can be mapped at the Earth's surface or traceable in the subsurface.

binding ability, and may be potential reservoirs for CO₂ storage. Shales typically have low permeability, however, which may make it difficult to inject large volumes of CO₂ at rates comparable to other types of geologic formations.

Another type of geologic formation that may be a candidate for CO₂ storage is known as flood basalt,⁵ such as that found on the Columbia River Plateau. Large and thick formations of flood basalts occur globally, and may have favorable characteristics for CO₂ storage, such as high porosity and permeability. Of further interest is the capacity for the minerals in these flood basalts to chemically react with CO₂, which could result in a large-scale conversion of the gas into stable, solid minerals that would remain underground for thousands of years.

Where Would Large Amounts of CO₂ Likely be Stored?

It is generally agreed that the most promising underground locations for storing CO₂ underground fall into three categories: (1) oil and gas reservoirs; (2) deep saline reservoirs⁶; and (3) unmineable coal seams. Oil and gas reservoirs and deep saline reservoirs are comprised of porous and permeable geologic formations, as discussed above, whose pore space is filled either with hydrocarbons, saline water (brine), or some combination of both. Coal that are not economically mineable because the beds are not thick enough, the beds are too deep, or the structural integrity of the coal bed⁷ is inadequate for mining may have the properties discussed above, making them amenable to CO₂ storage.

According to a DOE report,⁸ at least one of each of these three types of potential CO₂ reservoirs occur across most of the United States in relative proximity to many large point sources of CO₂, such as fossil fuel power plants or cement plants. Deep saline formations are the most widespread, and have the most potential storage capacity compared to oil and gas reservoirs or unmineable coal seams. Oil and gas fields or unmineable coal seams, however, could produce incremental amounts of crude oil or methane with CO₂ injection, which could offset some of the costs of storing CO₂. These techniques are referred to as enhanced oil recovery (EOR) and enhanced coal bed methane recovery (ECBM). Some parts of the country, such as New England and portions of the mid-Atlantic seaboard, are

⁵ Flood basalts are vast expanses of solidified lava, commonly containing olivine, that erupted over large regions in several locations around the globe. In addition to the Columbia River Plateau flood basalts, other well-known flood basalts include the Deccan Traps in India and the Siberian Traps in Russia.

⁶ Sometimes the term *saline aquifer* is used in this context, which is probably a misnomer, because the saline formations being discussed for CO₂ storage are typically too saline for drinking or agricultural use. Shallow aquifers that are brackish might be used as drinking water or agricultural resources with some treatment, such as desalinization, but such aquifers probably would not be considered as prime targets for storing CO₂.

⁷ *Coal bed* and *coal seam* are interchangeable terms.

⁸ U.S. Dept. of Energy, National Energy Technology Laboratory, *Carbon Sequestration Atlas of the United States and Canada* (March, 2007), 86 pages. Hereafter referred to as the *Carbon Sequestration Atlas*. See [http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/carbon_seq/atlas/index.html].

not close to identified CO₂ reservoirs; captured CO₂ from those regions may have been transported over long distances to reach a suitable storage site.

How Much CO₂ Can Be Stored Underground?

Table 1 shows estimates for CO₂ storage capacity in the United States and parts of Canada for the three reservoir types discussed above, according to the DOE *Carbon Sequestration Atlas*.

Table 1. Geological Storage Capacity for the United States and Parts of Canada

Reservoir type	Lower estimate of storage capacity (GtCO ₂)	Upper estimate of storage capacity (GtCO ₂)
Oil and gas fields ^a	82.4	—
Deep saline formations	919.0	3,378.0
Unmineable coal seams	156.1	183.5

^aAccording to DOE, oil and gas fields are sufficiently well-understood so that no range of values for storage capacity is given.

Note: GtCO₂ equals a billion metric tons of CO₂. A metric ton is approximately 2,200 pounds.

Even the lower estimates of storage capacity, when added together, indicate that the United States has enough capacity to store its total CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels for over 200 years (at the current rate of emissions).⁹ Excluding CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels used for transportation, which would likely *not* be captured and stored underground, these estimates suggest the United States could store over 300 years of CO₂ emitted from sources like power plants, factories, and cement manufacturers. Whether CO₂ can be economically captured, transported, and stored underground remains an open question.

Can the Storage Capacity Estimates for CO₂ be Confirmed?

The storage estimates are primarily drawn from existing information on the geology of the formations and various assumptions about the geologic storage mechanisms. Key considerations in the estimates include (1) how much total storage space is available for each type of reservoir, and (2) what is the efficiency of storing CO₂ in the available storage space (i.e., what fraction of the total pore space could actually be occupied by CO₂). How the estimates for the reservoirs will compare to their actual storage capacities will depend, in part, on a series of planned experiments: large-volume injection tests whereby CO₂ is injected into a formation and its behavior monitored (discussed below).

⁹ In 2005, the United States emitted approximately 5.6 GtCO₂ from the combustion of fossil fuels. See [<http://epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/usinventoryreport.html>].

The experiments should produce results that will enable researchers to test their assumptions about the storage properties of the geologic formations.¹⁰

How is CO₂ Injected Underground and How Deep Will it be Stored?

In a CCS operation, after CO₂ is captured from its source, it would be compressed, transported, and injected via wells drilled from the ground surface down to the storage reservoir and dispersed into the geologic formation. Compressing CO₂ is important because it becomes denser and occupies less space with increasing pressure. The denser it becomes, the more CO₂ can be stored within the pore space of a geologic reservoir. Also, with enough pressure and at a high enough temperature, CO₂ becomes *supercritical*, and is dense like a liquid, but flows like a gas. The ability of CO₂ to disperse efficiently through the interconnected pore spaces of a geologic reservoir increases significantly if it is under enough pressure to be a supercritical fluid.

The density of CO₂ increases still further if injected deeper. The denser it becomes, the more likely the CO₂ may stay underground. Conversely, if CO₂ is injected at shallow depths, it may be more likely to escape the reservoir. Above a depth of 2,500 feet, the chances increase that CO₂ would tend to rise towards the surface as a buoyant gas. Thus, it is likely that oil and gas reservoirs and saline formations located deeper than 2,500 feet would be preferred over shallower geologic formations. It is also recognized that injecting CO₂ deeper increases the distance between the storage reservoir and fresh water aquifers — used for drinking water or agricultural purposes — that are usually located at shallower depths.

Is CO₂ Currently Stored Underground?

The petroleum industry in the United States injects approximately 32 million metric tons of CO₂ underground each year to help recover oil and gas resources (enhanced oil recovery, or EOR).¹¹ Injected CO₂ expands and helps drive oil that is not recovered by primary or secondary recovery towards a production well.¹² Also, the CO₂ can dissolve in the oil, making it less viscous and able to flow more easily in the geologic formation. Some of the CO₂ is trapped in the reservoir during EOR; however, a large fraction of the injected gas may return to the surface with the recovered oil, where it is usually recovered and reinjected. Only small amounts of CO₂ produced by human activities are injected underground in EOR operations. Approximately 90% of the CO₂ injected for EOR in the United States comes from naturally occurring underground deposits; only about 3 million

¹⁰ See the DOE National Energy Technology Laboratory FAQ Information Portal at [http://www.netl.doe.gov/technologies/carbon_seq/FAQs/project-status.html#Geologic_Field].

¹¹ See [<http://www.fossil.energy.gov/programs/sequestration/geologic/index.html>].

¹² Primary recovery relies on the natural pressure of the reservoir to drive the oil or gas to the production well; secondary recovery uses water or gas to produce more petroleum. EOR is known as a tertiary recovery technique. See [<http://www.fossil.energy.gov/programs/oilgas/eor/index.html>].

metric tons of CO₂ comes from man-made sources like fertilizer or gas-processing plants.¹³

The United States leads the world in EOR activities and the petroleum industry has over 30 years of EOR experience. Engineering techniques and knowledge acquired since the early 1970s may be directly applicable to CCS. In fact, the amount of CO₂ produced from a typical 500 megawatt coal-fired power plant — about 10,000 metric tons per day — is comparable to the daily injection rates for some EOR operations.¹⁴ However, because the purpose of EOR is to extract oil and gas not normally recoverable, the net sequestration of CO₂ in EOR operations may be negligible, because the extracted oil and gas is burned for energy which releases CO₂ to the atmosphere. Moreover, even if all of the CO₂ used in U.S. EOR operations today remained trapped underground, it would represent a small fraction of the current U.S. emissions: fossil fuel power plants alone emit to the atmosphere more than 70 times the EOR amount of CO₂ each year.

The only major commercial project dedicated to CO₂ storage in a geologic reservoir today is the Sleipner Project, located approximately 150 miles off the coast of Norway in the North Sea. Over 2,700 metric tons of CO₂ per day — separated from natural gas at the Sleipner West Gas Field — is injected 2,600 feet below the seabed. Over the lifetime of the project, over 20 million metric tons of CO₂ are expected to be injected into the saline formation, which is sealed at the top by an extensive and thick shale layer.¹⁵ Monitoring surveys of the injected CO₂ indicate that the gas has spread out over nearly two square miles underground without leaking upwards. Long-term simulations also suggest that over hundreds to thousands of years the CO₂ will eventually dissolve in the saline water, becoming heavier and less likely to migrate away from the reservoir.

What Could Go Wrong With Storing CO₂ Underground?

Can CO₂ Leak From Geologic Formations?

It is expected that the reservoir characterization process would rule out geologic formations that are too shallow, do not have adequate caprocks or other geologic seals, are intersected by permeable faults or fractures that might be pathways for escaping CO₂, or are in tectonically active areas. Abandoned oil and gas fields are often considered first targets for CO₂ storage to take advantage of the natural configuration of permeable reservoir and overlying caprocks. Oil and gas reservoirs trapped hydrocarbons for millions of years before wells drilled into the reservoir produced the petroleum. Large-scale injection tests planned for the next several years should also provide information that would be used to guide site selection for full-scale CCS operations in the future, especially for deep saline reservoirs and unmineable coal seams which do not have the

¹³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report: *Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage*, 2005, p. 204. Hereafter referred to as IPCC Special Report.

¹⁴ IPCC Special Report, p. 233.

¹⁵ IPCC Special Report, Box 5.1.

same level of engineering experience as oil and gas fields.¹⁶ All of these considerations, however, do not rule out the chance that CO₂ could leak from geologic formations. How much could leak, over what duration, and what the effects might be are key questions.

Can CO₂ Harm People?

A likely public concern would be the potential for large volumes of CO₂ to leak to the ground surface and accumulate in low-lying, inhabited areas. CO₂ is not toxic, flammable, or explosive (like methane or propane gas, for example), but if allowed to accumulate in enclosed spaces at high concentrations (e.g., 40,000 ppm or more), CO₂ could displace oxygen and cause unconsciousness or asphyxiation.¹⁷ If CO₂ leaks into the soil and root zone at high enough concentrations, it may also harm vegetation. The chances of such high concentrations forming during CO₂ injection for CCS are likely remote, assuming the reservoir is well characterized, and “fast pathways” such as unidentified and abandoned wells, or unidentified permeable fractures and faults do not intersect the injection site and connect to occupied, low-lying, unventilated structures. The chances are probably higher for small amounts of leakage during injection, or leakage over time, given the complexity of most geologic formations, although it is also likely that some reservoirs may never leak CO₂.

What is at Risk if CO₂ Leaks?

In addition to the remote chance for affecting human health directly, discussed above, another likely possible risk is the chance of CO₂ leakage into an aquifer used for drinking water or as a supply for agriculture. If that occurs, contaminants that may be contained in the injected CO₂ could pollute the drinking water supply. It is unlikely CO₂ would be injected close to a critical aquifer; it would likely be injected deep enough so that the possibilities of upward leakage are fairly remote. The same precautions would apply: adequate caprock, deep reservoir, lack of “fast pathways” to the aquifer, as well as engineering expertise to inject the CO₂ without “overpressuring” the reservoir, which could create fractures or increase the chances of leakage around wells. Over the lifetime of an injection project, the chances of the injected CO₂ encountering unidentified faults or fractures in the reservoir may increase, as the CO₂ disperses laterally from the injection point and fills pore spaces throughout the geologic formation. However, the pressure of the injected CO₂ also decreases laterally from the injection point, so that the likelihood of large releases over a short timespan also decreases with distance from where the CO₂ is injected.

Injecting CO₂ into saline formations lowers the pH (increases the acidity) of the formation water. More acidic waters may dissolve minerals in the formation such as calcium carbonate and release metals, such as iron and manganese, or other elements contained within those minerals. The increased acidity could also increase the permeability of the formation, allowing the injected CO₂ to migrate more readily. Initial

¹⁶ See [<http://www.netl.doe.gov/index.html>].

¹⁷ 40,000 ppm is the value listed as immediately dangerous to life and health (IDLH) by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. See [<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/idlh/intridl4.html>].

results from injection experiments¹⁸ that observed this process seem to indicate that the reservoir integrity remained intact and CO₂ did not leak. Additional injection experiments may help understand whether increased acidity following CO₂ injection is a significant issue.

How Would Leaks be Detected?

Geophysical techniques, such as seismic imaging, have been used at the Sleipner sequestration project, discussed above, to map the shape of the CO₂ plume at depth and plot its migration over time as CO₂ is injected. These techniques could be useful for detecting leakage from the reservoir, especially if the CO₂ concentrations were high enough to distinguish them from the saline formation water. To help detect leaks around wells, or into nearby structures or dwellings, tracer compounds — which are detectable at very low concentrations — could be added to the injected CO₂ and then monitored.¹⁹ If shallow aquifers are a concern, monitoring wells can be installed above the CO₂ storage reservoir, and below the drinking water aquifer, to measure changes in pressure and chemistry that may indicate CO₂ is escaping the reservoir. Also, changes to vegetation at the ground surface could be monitored over time, which may indicate CO₂ leakage into the soil from below.

How Long Will CO₂ Stay Underground?

When CO₂ is injected into an oil and gas reservoir or a deep saline formation, it is expected to occupy some portion of the pore space, and displace the saline water, oil, gas, or some combination of the natural formation fluids. Initially, the injected CO₂ would occupy the pore space as a liquid or supercritical fluid, as discussed above, and remain in the geologic formation unless one or more of the possible leakage scenarios outlined above occurs. This is commonly referred to as *volumetric storage*.

Over hundreds or thousands of years, however, the injected CO₂ would start to dissolve into the formation fluids, further decreasing its chances of leaking out of the reservoir. This is known as *solution storage*. Solution storage would effectively trap the CO₂ underground for a long time, but the rate at which CO₂ dissolves into the saline water decreases as the salinity increases; CO₂ would dissolve only very slowly in deep, highly saline formations.

CO₂ injected into coal seams could be tightly bound, or *adsorbed*, onto the coal surfaces, and would likely stay bound to the coal for a long time unless further disturbed. Studies indicate that CO₂ could displace methane (and the methane recovered at the surface) which occurs naturally in many coal seams. Other studies indicate that injecting CO₂ into coal seams may cause the coal to swell, however, which could reduce the

¹⁸ Y. K. Kharaka, et al., “Gas-water interactions in the Frio Formation following CO₂ injection: implications for the storage of greenhouse gases in sedimentary basins,” *Geology*, v. 34, no. 7 (July, 2006), pp. 577-580.

¹⁹ Similarly, chemicals added to propane or natural gas are “tracers” detectable by smell that could indicate leaks.

permeability of the coal seam and limit its effectiveness for sequestering large amounts of CO₂.²⁰

Injecting CO₂ into deep flood basalts, such as those found in the Columbia River Plateau occupying portions of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, may cause the minerals in the basalt to react with the CO₂ and form solid minerals (known as *mineral storage*). The minerals would likely stay underground in the flood basalts for thousands to millions of years, essentially trapping the injected CO₂ for geologic time. Flood basalts are attracting attention for CO₂ storage in part because of their potential for mineral storage, and because basalts commonly possess good porosity and permeability. However, unlike oil and gas reservoirs and deep saline formations which form in sedimentary basins and are often overlain by impermeable cap rocks, flood basalts are comprised of multiple layers of erupted lava flows. Lava flows may not provide the same degree of geologic seal as sedimentary rocks, like shales. Of possible concern is whether the injected CO₂ will have sufficient time to react with the basalts and form stable minerals before the CO₂ migrates to the surface.

What is the Status of Demonstration Projects for Underground CO₂ Storage?

Beginning in 2003, DOE created seven regional carbon sequestration partnerships to identify opportunities for carbon sequestration field tests in the United States and Canada.²¹ The regional partnerships program is being implemented in a three-phase overlapping approach: (1) characterization phase (from FY2003 to FY2005); (2) validation phase (from FY2005 to FY2009); and (3) deployment phase (from FY2008 to FY2017).²² According to Carbon Sequestration Atlas, the first phase of the partnership program identified the potential for sequestering over 1,000 GtCO₂ across the United States and parts of Canada.

²⁰ Cui, X., R. M. Bustin, and L. Chikatamarla, "Adsorption-induced coal swelling and stress: Implications for methane production and acid gas sequestration into coal seams," *Journal of Geophysical Research*, vol. 112, B10202 (2007).

²¹ The seven partnerships are Midwest Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership; Midwest (Illinois Basin) Geologic Sequestration Consortium; Southeast Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership; Southwest Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership; West Coast Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership; Big Sky Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership; and Plains CO₂ Reduction Partnership; see [<http://www.fossil.energy.gov/programs/sequestration/partnerships/index.html>].

²² DOE Carbon Sequestration Technology Roadmap and Program Plan 2007, p. 36.

The third phase, deployment, is intended to demonstrate large-volume, prolonged injection and CO₂ storage in a wide variety of geologic formations. According to DOE, this phase is supposed to address the practical aspects of large-scale operations, presumably producing the results necessary for commercial CCS activities to move forward. On October 9, 2007, DOE announced that it awarded the first three large-scale carbon sequestration projects in the United States.²³ According to DOE, each of the three projects plans to inject a million tons of CO₂ or more into deep saline reservoirs.

²³ See [http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/press/2007/07072-DOE_Awards_Sequestration_P
rojects.html].