

Solar Miracle

And speaking of Nobels, could it be that West Virginia Congressman Nick Rahall was robbed this year of the physics prize? We had to wonder, upon noticing Mr. Rahall's proposal for a pilot program to create "strategic solar reserves" on federal lands.

This miracle provision is buried deep within the House-passed energy bill, so Senators will soon have a chance to explore this exciting initiative when the bill goes to conference. Everyone knows about the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which stores something (oil) that can be stored. Last we checked, however, storing solar energy was a slightly more difficult scientific proposition. "I have no idea how that would work," says University of Maryland physics professor Robert Park. "This is our greatest single problem with energy—figuring out how to store electricity."

Dashing our hopes that history will soon be made by the Bureau of Land Management, a House staffer reports that the provision was the work of the Natural Resources Committee and adds: "They don't propose storing solar energy, but instead identifying and setting aside as 'solar energy reserves' public land areas that have high solar incidence . . . and that are not conflicted with other environmental or usage issues." When we called the Natural Resources Committee, the office expert was on an airplane, but staff helpfully directed us to a registered lobbyist for solar energy producers, who, according to staff, "had a hand in helping to craft this component of the energy bill."

Now, that's the kind of physics that Congress understands: Doing a favor for a special-interest lobby. On second thought, hold that Nobel.