

Out of gas: The need for a national plan

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The American addiction to oil is like an addiction to amphetamines, says Alfred W. Crosby: the substance is enormously stimulating and its users think they function much better with it than without it. But the substance alters one's sense of reality, and if it's taken in large doses over a long period its effects are poisonous (*Children of the Sun: A History of Humanity's Unappeasable Appetite for Energy*). And those addicted to oil, like those addicted to "speed," begin to panic whenever the supply is in jeopardy.

Whatever the specific reasons for the current spiking of oil and gas prices, it reminds us that the supply is not limitless. Most likely the world will have to learn to live without fossil fuels sometime in this century, according to David Goodstein (*Out of Gas: The End of the Age of Oil*). Oil production in the lower 48 states peaked in the early 1970s, and by some predictions worldwide production will peak within a decade. Meanwhile, worldwide demand continues to grow, especially from modernizing countries like China and India.

So what is the alternative plan? The basic plan has been outlined by environmentalists for years. It begins with raising the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standard for cars, which was set 31 years ago at 27.5 miles per gallon and excluded gas-guzzling "light trucks"—a category that includes SUVs, vans and pickups. Some argue that the technology exists to meet a standard of 40 mpg for cars and light trucks within ten years.

In addition to stressing conservation, the government should provide incentives for developing alternative fuels such as ethanol, biodiesel and hydrogen, and for the generation of electricity through geothermal, solar, wind and nuclear power. Turning to these fuels will also address the threat of global warming, which is caused mainly by the burning of fossil fuels.

Finding alternatives to petroleum is also key to international relations. The search for oil has sparked warfare for decades. Oil needs were part of the U.S.'s rationale for its two incursions in the Persian Gulf, whatever the other reasons given.

Pollster Daniel Yankelovich reports that virtually all Americans think that energy dependence jeopardizes national security and that problems overseas could endanger our supply of oil. In addition, "85 percent said they believe that the U.S. government would be capable of doing something about the problem if it tried."

We need a national plan, not unlike President Kennedy's strategy for putting a man on the moon. As Senator Barack Obama put it, "Saying that America is addicted to oil without following a real plan for energy independence is like admitting alcoholism and then skipping the 12-step program."