U.S. Presidential candidates' staffs briefed on peak oil and the plastic plague

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Just to cover my bases, in case politics and laying groundwork can do wonders, I have just spent a week in Washington, D.C. talking with staffers of Senators Obama, McCain and Clinton. Their understanding of peak oil is rising at a critical time, perhaps in time for the election, but certainly afterwards for Presidential or Senatorial initiatives. The related issue of plastics and their threat to the oceans and public health was something I was able to link to peak oil with all of them -- without eyes glazing over, nor popping out. Ideally, our catching up to China and its ban on plastic bags could become a policy option or lively point of debate.

Last June the M King Hubbert Tribute organization asked some peak oil activists to brief U.S. presidential candidates on the subject. The process ensued and peaked in recent days on Capitol Hill. The organizer, Jason Brenno, guided us: "Some ideas we have had so far for candidates are just very basic steps probably to be done in order:

"Assemble a team of experts to assist you (the candidate) in understanding this problem to
- Help you articulate this problem

and begin to advise you on solutions

- Sign you up for newsletters, get peak oil publications, etc.

- Have your staff begin to read publications, books etc.

- Recognize that Peak Oil is as serious a problem as Global Warming and that the that the more disruptive effects of peak oil will surface well before those of Global Warming, however, they need to be treated as very serious intertwined problems that need attention now

- Begin to alert the public of this problem"

By the time I got involved the candidates had whittled down to three major ones. I made my appointments following excellent Capitol Hill presentations by Robert Hirsch and Roger Bezdek who are well-known for solid peak oil analyses.

An additional reason I had to meet the energy staffers of the candidates was to discuss plastics, in hopes of a ban on disposable bags as a start.
In the process, I may have located the best bet for national legislative action on plastics: Peter Welch, Democratic Congressman from Vermont, who's a member of the Peak Oil Caucus. I left with his staff some materials which have moved many so far to take action. I believe legislators and other public officials can see that action on plastics allows one to link the issue to peak oil, climate change and war for oil (as has been done so effectively by San Francisco Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi).

An unusual hand-out for the energy staffers had to be the award-winning documentary "Our Synthetic Sea." The film is now available in Spanish also, as is the brochure Plastics Are Forever (from Algalita Marine Research Foundation). For peak oil literature, I gave copies of the San Francisco Bay Guardian's recent feature on the city's Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force. I suggested that a national commission emulate San Francisco's.

I found that all three candidates' staffers were open to learning more about peak oil and what we might call "energy reality," after the openings made by Dr.s Bezdek and Hirsch. The Hubbert Tribute group and I have asked that Dr.s Bezdek's and Hirsch's slide show be on their website (link below), so many people can see this very informative presentation.

None of the staffers was aware of the plastics issue regarding the oceans or our bodies. The staffers were dismayed to learn the awful truth about plastics, yet they didn't seem eager to have their candidate jump on the issue. The best chance for adopting a stance on fighting the plastic plague (with the related issues of energy and climate), if there is one at all among the candidates, might be Hillary Clinton, judging by her impassioned female staffers' ability to relate their leader's concerns to the issue. The staffers' reactions to my presentation was most positive, even after a hard week of campaign developments. These staffers seemed eager to keep up the communication and come to San Francisco to

see our town's progressive policies in action.

The oily nitty gritty of the crunch to come

Although the meeting with Obama's energy staffer was brief enough that he may not have been able to receive the full import of my message, he at least expressed the ideal personally that it would be nice if overnight we could be consuming only 1/10th the energy we use today. To support that sentiment I mentioned to him our new Culture Change reports on agriculture being unsustainable in the long term for a large population. As an aside, I dropped the names of famous civil rights attorneys I know, as Senator Obama was one himself, and I described the pepperspray torture case my daughter and our friends waged successfully. I later mentioned the case to Senator McCain's staffer in my praise of her boss's stand against U.S. government torture.

Politics are being played that I find regrettable, when Obama's economic policy is trotted out last Wednesday at an SUV plant. When I mentioned the setting to a car-free Hillary campaigner, it was pointed out that Hillary had just appeared at a GM plant in Wisconsin, but that Hillary's policy is about retooling such factories for green jobs (presumably trains or bicycles). Hillary was represented to be on top of the intertwined issues of public health, energy and climate since the early 1990s.

Prior to my visits, as I mentioned above, contacts and meetings were accomplished by Robert Hirsch and Roger Bezdek. I viewed their specially prepared PDF/PowerPoint on peak oil and was favorably impressed. I'm sure their presentations were persuasive, and I'm very glad they happened. A lot must have gotten across in a short time judging by this PDF.

I noticed some problems with the presentation's content that are peculiar to me and my perspective. Perhaps a significant omission, that of advocating life-style change and realizing that the entire economic/energy system will collapse soon, was made because the basic peak oil message was already mindblowing enough and contains grave implications. It was then that I came to visit these relatively insulated staffers/candidates to suggest culture change, which they got first through noting my current affiliation.

Except with McCain's energy staffer, who had not seen the slide show, I shared every one of my objections. One of my main points was that there is no technofix -- i.e., a viable substitute for petroleum on the qualitative or quantitative scale necessary to keep the consumer economy going. I implied this would be painfully apparent soon, but they did not probe much. They all made note of the word "petrocollapse" that I explained in the course of describing the role of the market and supply as opposed to solely the geological phenomenon of peak oil.

As I explained to Jason Brenno (and I sent the same email to Haley Stevens of the Clinton campaign), I tried to build on what was in the mind of the recipient of the Bezdek/Hirsch persentation, taking the message to the next level. My notes on the slide show were set down in email after my meeting with one of Sen. Obama's energy staffers, as such:

"As a correction to one of the slides: the 1979 oil shock was precipitated by a 9 (nine) percent shortfall of gasoline deliveries in March of that year, rather than 5%, which we several weeks before predicted and warned the nation about. (However, a 5% figure might have been applicable to some other sector of the oil industry.)

"I was intrigued by 'Viable mitigation options exist, but they're not what many people think.' I found there was little offered on this, but maybe the discussion covered a lot. I have been exploring this area for many years and am always willing to go into sensitive territory that many would like to hope doesn't exist.

"I also gleaned from the presentation that Dr.s Bezdek and Hirsch assumed that society would, could or should keep using energy massively, and that -- perhaps implied or left as an unspoken question -- a large population of consumers would be somehow sustained. [I did not get time to mention this to McCain's staffer.]

"It was clear that the message of their presentation was that the citizenry will all be relying on government and industry. I'm all for good programs and the need to cooperate for the common good, but if people have faith -- as individuals or as local communities -- that the experts and officials are going to solve the ravages of peaked oil, a negative surprise beyond words is in store across the board.

"I raised the certainty that when or if a national Katrina hits, it cannot be coped with by government. [That would be true with a non-Bush government too, as I had to stress to a Clinton campaign staffer.]

"I stressed to all the staffs that government and industry should not be assumed by individuals and communities to be able to step in and solve the problems; rather, it is up to us individually and as neighborhoods and communities to do whatever we have to do to weather the storm (or tsunami as Roscoe Bartlett calls it). Mitigation is best done through emancipating ourselves from petroleum and energy in general -- ideally now; this could harm the economy but it will collapse anyway. [The latter comment was implied over the course of my talks rather than stated so bluntly.]

Roger Bezdek reported to Jason Brenno that the briefings Roger and Robert Hirsch gave resulted in some good questions, but staffers are not really up-to-speed on the issues.

"The briefings discussed the issue of peak oil and its ramifications. The major topics covered included:

What is peak oil?

Why is it inevitable

Why is it important?

Why should a Presidential candidate be aware of the issue?

When is it likely to occur?

What are the likely economic consequences?

Why will technology, economics, and business-as-usual not solve the problem?

Why should we care now?

What are the realistic options for dealing with it - renewables, energy efficiency, fossil fuels, nuclear, etc.?

Why might it already be too late for successful mitigation?

Why may government intervention be required?

What policies may be required?

"In particular, we stressed the gravity and timing of the problem and that it was not going to be solved with windmills and ethanol."

The PowerPoint/PDF presentation was titled

"THE PEAKING OF WORLD OIL PRODUCTION: IMPLICATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES & PITFALLS"

- Dr. Roger H. Bezdek,
Dr. Robert L. Hirsch,
Management Information Services, Inc.

January 30, 2008

misi-net.com

See the MISI presentation at mkinghubbert.com

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The M King Hubbert Tribute website:

mkinghubbert.com

Principals of the group include David Room, Oakland, California consultant on peak oil.

A new association of peak oil/climate change activists and researchers is Culture Change Consulting. See the webpage for this new team at

culturechange.org