Drastic Energy Contraction Ahead

Contributed by Paul Smith
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Editor's Introduction: The author notes that a more cheerful title might be "On the Way to a Sustainable Future." I could go for that substitution. Unfortunately, we are not "on the way" until overpopulation is checked somehow. In this article the uncomfortable realities of the effects of immigration on U.S. population growth are quantified. Yet, there are two problems with focusing on them too much.

Before identifying them, consider the fact that up to three quarters of population growth going on in the U.S. is from immigrants and their higher fertility rate. But this should not imply that the U.S. (or the world) will be able to solve its problems by somehow cutting way back on immigration.

Additionally, focusing on immigrants' population growth is a good way to mislead ourselves: (1) Crash is happening anyway; government policies cannot stop petrocollapse and climate distortion, both of which will cut population size drastically. (2) Focusing on immigration or even overpopulation at this time can distract us from urgent preparations for local self-reliance, which is our only future.

While the motives of the Heritage Foundation may be usually suspect, there can come a time soon when some of us find more and more commonality in the future now taking shape. So while Paul Smith's article cites the Heritaage Foundation and touches on controversial ground, it is essential that we deal with the issues he presents. He reminds us that energy consumption itself is not on the table, and that switching energy technologies to maintain consumption is a false hope. - JL

The message has gone forth loud and clear in the halls of Congress, in the White House, in the media, and in the reports of reputable scientific commissions. Our nation and the nations of the world must take drastic measures to reduce the atmospheric pollution resulting from the burning of fossil fuels. Otherwise the planet and all of its inhabitants will suffer the dire consequences of harmful climate change.

Our nation is now in the throes of an energy contraction, but the energy contraction following the current contraction will be much more profound in its consequences than anything that we are now experiencing.

Political leaders in the United States, both at the national level and the state level have responded to the threat by advocating that renewable energy sources be developed as a means of reducing our dependence on the pollution-generating fossil fuels. The leaders haven’t proposed that the overall use of energy be reduced, but rather that the renewable energy merely substitutes for the energy derived from fossil fuels.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) has reported that the total energy consumption in the United States in 2007 was 101.605 quadrillion British thermal units (Btu’s). About 85% of U.S energy consumption was due to the burning of fossil fuels, primarily coal, natural gas, and petroleum.

Nuclear power provided 8.28% of the total, and renewable energy (Biofuels, waste, wood derived fuel, geothermal, hydroelectric, and solar/PV, and wind power) provided 6.72% of the total. Solar/PV and wind power combined contributed less than 1% of the total energy used in the U.S. in 2007.

Solar and wind power energy could be doubled and then doubled again and the amount of energy in relation to total U.S. energy need would still be relatively inconsequential. You wouldn't know that if you listened to our esteemed leaders in Washington DC. Energy from those two sources is certainly valuable and in time the amount of it might possibly be increased to more than 5%, especially if the total energy use is reduced.

In the meantime, the amount of petroleum being used is now topping Hubbert's Peak with no where to go but down the other side. Our reliance on fossil fuels for such a large amount of our energy is fouling the atmosphere and causing very harmful changes in the climate. Coal is no panacea. The coal that has recently been presented by the coal industry as "Clean Coal," will very likely never be commercially viable.

Given the circumstances described above, a reasonable energy program might include a 25% reduction of the 86.25 quadrillion Btu's of fossil fuel now used in the U.S. annually. That would reduce the current U.S. total energy consumption of 101.605 quadrillion Btu's per year to about 80 quadrillion Btu's. Further reduction would probably be necessary at a later time in order to bring the fossil fuel consumption in the U.S. to a sustainable level.

How could such a drastic reduction in the use of fossil fuels be achieved? Some sources have advocated a substantial increase in the development of nuclear power. But that is very controversial and for good reasons, including the nuclear waste disposal problem and the long time needed to rev up to full operation.

The political and economic leaders and general citizenry would need to acquire a very complete understanding of the necessity for the endeavor and a very determined commitment to carry it out. Implementing the energy reduction would require significant changes in transportation methods, residential locations, production and manufacturing functions, and in construction and remodeling of buildings. Even more importantly, it would require substantial progress in stabilizing the population.

Without population stabilization or progress in that direction, most other efforts to achieve a sustainable economy would be largely in vain. The Obama administration and the Democratic majority in Congress appear to be dedicated to implementing so-called "comprehensive immigration reform," which is code for granting amnesty to the estimated 12 to 15 million illegal aliens now in the country.

Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, in an article dated May 15, 2006, estimated that granting amnesty to the illegal aliens currently in the country would result in the addition of 66 million people to the U.S. population within 20 years. Those new citizens and permanent residents after receiving amnesty would, in turn, be able to sponsor minor children, spouses, and parents residing in their home countries to enter and attain legal residency in the U.S.

Rector's estimate did not include the aliens that would enter the country illegally following the amnesty. It is probable that those illegal aliens, along with the aliens that were granted amnesty, would increase the U.S. population by over 100 million people within 20 years.

As already noted, our nation will experience a drastic energy contraction some time after the current contraction. Although the sequence and timing of events leading to the contraction is uncertain, the contraction itself is unavoidable. What is optional is how it comes about – how it develops.

Our political, economic, and industrial leaders need to instigate actions to reduce the use of energy, especially fossil fuel energy, to a sustainable level. That might enable our descendants living on the future side of Hubbert's Peak [global

maximum of oil extraction] to actually enjoy living conditions that are better than the ones that presently exist.

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Further reading:

"Overcrowding in Our Less and Less Natural Environment" by Jan Lundberg, 27 March 2009:

culturechange.org

"Population growth must be addressed with insight" by Michael Poremba and Jan Lundberg, 20 March 2009:

culturechange.org

"Overpopulation is a Cultural Challenge" by Chuck Burr, 04 April 2009: