National energy conversation getting louder

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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That's conversation, not conservation. We'll get the latter only if (1) we have the real conversation or (2) we get hit over the head with heavy pre-petrocollapse warnings. I'm glad to say that it's not just the second factor shaping up.

Change is in the wind. However, the nation is dominated by small minds tied to the fossil-fueled status quo, instead of listening to big-picture energy analysts such as Congressman Roscoe Bartlett and consultant Robert Hirsch. These power-house scientists spoke at a Pentagon-sponsored presentation, "Energy: a Conversation about Our National Addiction" on April 24th within a stone's throw of that five-sided building - ironic, as the Department of Defense is the single largest consumer of oil in the world. I attended this Energy Conversation and bring you, the concerned reader, a rundown of what was presented.

Many awareness-raising events concerned with peak oil and petrocollapse are taking place lately. The news media, mainly concerned with price sensation, are helping somewhat to awaken the oil-addicted population, albeit with narrower concerns than the End of the Oil Age. Recent headlines include "Beijing's Pursuit of Oil" and "Consumers Face a New Reality." The San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a peak oil resolution on April 11, 2006. It acknowledges the threats posed by peak oil and calls for the establishment of a city-wide study to assess San Francisco's vulnerability to peak oil.

At least George W. Bush opened some floodgates of attention this year by announcing the U.S. is "addicted to oil." He thus allowed others in government to come out of the woodwork on energy issues. This may be Bush II's main legacy, as little and late as it was at this point in history. For those Americans that were still asleep, we are now all pretty much on the same page as to oil dependence and the likelihood of higher prices and tighter supply. It is time to turn the page and learn about such basics as energy production ratios (net energy), the liquid-fuel nature of the energy crisis, and the impossibility of delaying peak oil and its effects if we are indeed at the historic high of global extraction.

Honestly curing ourselves of addiction means we don't try to maintain supply. Is that what we'd like to see for heroin addicts, to assure a "fair" price and fight for unlimited access? Just as with heroin, the only sensible course is to stop the habit. Get off petroleum starting now. Sorry, there's no handy substitute - except culture change, as a lieutenant colonel enthusiastically told me.

The April 24th event was naturally attended by a raft of Pentagon staffers, some of whom are aware of climate change and concerned about it. Others (e.g., weapons peddlers and other Beltway Bandits) still believe there is no end to energy supply and are not worried about the "alleged" threat to climate stability. The attendees were fortunately fairly diverse, with journalists and environmentalist professionals too. The Energy Conversation series has created an Energy Networking List, and the whole process could even help shape U.S. policy and encourage lifestyle change.

As oil prices have broken past the $70 per barrel mark - at a time when national and global oil demand levels are not at their respective seasons for top usage - we are in a time of heightened sensitivity to price and supply issues. On April 24th came the politically tinged initiative: "Bush orders probe into gas price cheating" (USA Today). It is predictable nowadays that more people are looking closely at energy consumption and the outlook for meeting their expectations or fears. Never before has petroleum been so firmly positioned as perhaps the most vital issue spanning military, trade and environmental developments.

National media concern is fleeting, when gasoline prices might fail to rise to a painful enough level to bring about truly major shifts in transportation. ["Drivers switch to public transit" USA Today, April 23rd's top story] But headlines this summer could say "Gasoline Prices Zoom Past $4 a Gallon As Shortages Hit". Those of us who rely on bikes won't mind, and we'll welcome the added company of recovering motorists.

There is very little "give" in the world oil supply situation, considering demand has reached 85 million barrels per day. Extremely high utilization of refining capacity compounds the petering-out wells around the world, as more than three quarters of major oil exporting countries are past their peak crude extraction. Building more refineries takes too much time, and they would have to accommodate undesirably heavy crudes. Liquified natural gas (LNG) did not factor into this Conversation, as it does not stretch finite gas supplies.

The number of days of supply to be made available from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve is never more than weeks, depending on the changing volume. Any significant supply disruption, whether due to the Iran situation or some unforeseen event in our insecure climate-altered world, can trigger panic buying of fuels. Then the oil market reacts quickly in presenting eye-popping price increases that encourage hoarding. So much for scenarios of gradually declining oil use, when socioeconomic upheaval can take down the world economy as the life blood of commerce and daily living

suddenly dries up.

I brought up the market factor in the Q & A session at the Energy Conversation. First inviting the crowd to "attend the DC Petrocollapse Conference on May 6 at All Souls Unitarian Church; it's all on petrocollapse.org," I asked "What is the role of the market in shaping the reaction to supply shortage from peaking? These studies on peak oil have not taken the market into account."

Because I did not specify the oil market, the answers were more about the free market in general including the stock market. Congressman Bartlett's position is that the free market will not be able provide more supply when depletion is setting in. He quoted Donald Rumsfeld regarding peak oil: "The market will fix it." "As if," Bartlett continued, "there are infinite resources. It will be a bumpy ride to a transition, including a crash." Hirsch pointed out that in 1973 the Arab Oil Embargo people panicked. He also said that there have been forecasts of oil running out long ago, but "this time it is not crying wolf" although peaking does not mean actually running out, as he said at the outset. Bartlett pointed out that in the story of the Little Boy Who Cried Wolf, "in the end the wolf came and ate the people."

Bartlett's message is tremendously logical and moral: Don't try to fulfill rising demand to cope with peak oil via supply solutions because this would mean "more greenhouse gases" and just increasing our future vulnerability to a greater supply crunch: "A bigger fall later. We pigged out. Filling the gap (with supply) is intending to further pig out."

Bartlett shows how pigging out is not necessary for happiness. He shows a graph of nations' happiness indicators compared to their energy use, and sure enough, the U.S. is not at the very top in happiness despite our energy gluttony.

He also hints that bridging the gap is unfeasible: "For Canadian tar sands, 3 million barrels a day can be achieved in 10 years." Meanwhile, "more natural gas is used in the tar sands process than (energy extracted)." It was refreshing to hear both Bartlett and Hirsch call the deposits "tar sands" rather than the new, misleading name "oil sands." As for oil shale, Bartlett likens it to "cooking the asphalt out on the roads to get liquid oil," which is technically possible - but not efficient.

Bartlett's presentations are far from dull. His one-liners never stop: "I'm a conservative but I try not to be an idiot." The room laughed. "We're not going to satisfy our energy requirements from agriculture" as the topsoil is depleted. "How are we going to grow food without natural gas?"

The evening should have been videotaped for the widest possible audience. C-SPAN was invited, but they feel they have covered the Congressman quite a bit already. Not enough, in my opinion, but as oil gets hotter as a subject, he will hopefully be in greater demand. Robert Hirsch should be covered by the press much more than he (Hirsch) is.

Hirsch and Bartlett are high-powered scientists who have tracked peak oil for years. These two men are the real leaders of our country, if oil is our biggest issue. They aren't the only leaders, but the nation cannot do much worse than to ignore Drs. Hirsch and Bartlett. I compared notes with Hirsch, who said he was "in the oil industry for 10 years and we did not talk about peak oil." I told him I had a similar experience. The Congressman told Hirsch I was the same Lundberg as Lundberg Survey, and I told them I learned more about oil after leaving the industry and read Beyond Oil: The Threat to Food and Fuel in the Coming Decades(1986).

Robert Hirsch is Senior Energy Program Advisor at the military/technology consulting firm SAIC. His presentation was clear, supported by facts and references, and also frightening. He says, "Worry now. The problem is enormous. There will be massive shortages unless we act in time. But mitigation takes a long time. Peak oil is not a theory; 33 out of 48 of the largest oil producing countries have hit peak. There is no warning for peak, as production goes up until the peak. After peak, the drop off is sudden." He asks, Why should we not expect the world peak to be like the examples we've seen for countries?"

"We are eating our seed corn" by using from 2 to 4 barrels of oil for every barrel discovered, he points out. He believes the coming shortage due to peaking "will be a liquid fuels problem more than an energy crisis. The Department of Defense will require enormous investment, and 30-50 years of liquid fuels is essential at present." It seems that Hirsch is projecting an inability to maintain force into the future. One of the Dept. of Defense sponsors of the Energy Conversation is the Office of Force Transformation.

"Nature is going to grab us and not give us an opportunity to evolve." This is hampered, Hirsch says, by certain people who "don't give us credible information." "Technology and price will not save us. He goes on to explain that "oil is very different from minerals" regarding extraction success in response to economics.

Hirsch's "most optimistic case is an assumed crash program" when people can agree the crisis is finally here. For mitigation, he sees as the first and best measure "fuel efficiency" across the board. Less-available measures, but close to implementation, are the maximizing of tar sands and heavy oil, coal liquifaction, gas to liquids, and enhanced oil recovery. But "the vehicle fleet is not replaceable fast." On the subject of what happens to be President Bush's energy solution, biofuels, Hirsch educated us that "It takes energy to deliver energy… biomass is not economic." He concluded by

saying Peak Oil represents an unprecedented, abrupt energy change or forced transition.

A more radical critique of the present economy and its sprawling infrastructure suggests that "Any part that is integral to that particular whole, that is made more efficient, makes the whole more efficient at the destruction it does so well," according to Richard "Depaving Guru" Register of Ecocity Builders.

Congressman Roscoe Bartlett quoted Condoleezza Rice's candid statement on energy earlier this month: "…nothing has really taken me aback more as Secretary of State than the way that the politics of energy is - I will use the word warping - diplomacy around the world... It is, of course, an energy supply that is still heavily dependent on hydrocarbons, which makes more difficult our desire to have growth, environmental protection and reliable energy supply all in a package.... on the energy side, we have simply got to do something about the warping now of diplomatic effort by the all-out rush for energy supply." Bartlett observed that "it would be nice if policy matched words."

He points out that 4.3 years is how long U.S. oil would last the nation if we only used domestic supplies. "Since 1980 we've used more oil than we've found." He attacked deceptive projections by the Energy Information Administration (Dept. of Energy) which represents a 50% probability of optimistic oil production, as a future mean – "it's bizarre to use statistics that way." He quoted a suppressed U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study on peak oil that concludes "There is no alternative fuel that can replace oil." He points out, "Why didn't we think that if (geologist M. King) Hubbert was right about the U.S. peak (1970), why not about world peak?"

Bartlett appears to be pro-nuclear power, although he must know that the net energy from uranium mining and the whole process of nuclear power is not attractive. Yet, if he were anti-nuclear too, there would be little to distinguish him from a flaming radical environmentalist. He allows also that if we attain fusion energy "then we will be home free." Bartlett is very realistic: "In an aggressive program, first is conservation." The overall approach must be likened to, he says, "World War II's effort (victory gardens), along with the effort to put a man on the moon, and the Manhattan Project… the worst case is World War III. We face a hard landing, the 1930s will look good. Or it could be The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

Upcoming Energy Conversation speakers include Jeremy Rifkin on May 22. The crowd will be "forearmed" to evaluate Rifkin's claims for a potential Hydrogen Economy. On June 20 Matt Simmons, author of Twilight in the Desert, will hold forth.

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Attend the DC Petrocollapse May 6th at the All Souls Church, Unitarian, from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M. Richard Heinberg, the top peak oil author, is among the speakers. Film premieres for Washington: "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil" and "Our Synthetic Sea." A music program by peak oilers tops off the event. Details and registration are online at

http://www.petrocollapse.org

Local Solutions to the Energy Dilemma: Conference April 27 – 29 in New York City. Speakers include Jan Lundberg, Jim Kunstler, Derrick Jensen, Matt Savinar, Mike Ruppert, and too many more to mention. See

http://www.energysolutionsconference.org/

Congressman Roscoe Bartlett: THE PEAKING OF WORLD OIL, House of Representatives, February 8, 2006 [Great graphs!]:

http://www.peakoil.net/Publications/PeakOilSpclOrder%2315TextCharts020806Low.pdf

Robert Hirsch's "Shaping the peak of world oil production" from World Oil, Oct. 2005:

http://www.worldoil.com/magazine/MAGAZINE_DETAIL.asp?ART_ID=2696&MONTH_YEAR=Oct-2005

The San Francisco Peak Oil Resolution is available online at

http://www.sfbayoil.org/sfoa/media/resolution_to_board.pdf

Interviews on this resolution with members of San Francisco Oil Awareness are available online at

http://www.globalpublicmedia.com

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Ecocity Builders, Oakland, California, Richard Register, founder:

http://ecocitybuilders.org/