Oil expectations of consumers demanding more, and a response

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
29 February 2012

On Feb. 25, 2012, a message came in from an irate website visitor whose name won't be used:

Subject: Off Shore Drilling and North Dakota Oil

Are you crazy? The United States of America needs to be independant and free from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran and Yemen oil. Opec's agenda for keeping gas prices at a rediculous cost to consumers will cause middle class Americans commuting to work to stop putting money into our economy.
Environmentalist need to ask themselves who are you protecting? Not Americans.
Thank you and push for drilling in the USA!

/signed/

Below is my response to the confused woman that I fired off right away. She didn't respond, yet. I could have limited myself to one or two points, but increasingly felt that still more had to be explained to this poorly informed die-hard consumer. She seemed to hail from North Dakota, but her worldview is common throughout the United Paved Precincts of America. Ironically, it is in her state that the trend to cease maintaining paved roads, and turning them back into dirt roads, has gained favor among revenue-strapped governments.

Dear ...,

From your email message and Subject you seem to believe there is virtually limitless energy from oil, even though offshore drilling for harder-to-access petroleum gives rise to catastrophes such as the BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. But I will answer your angry questions as best I can.

Some background: I was a well-known oil analyst for many years before going into the energy conservation field non-profit. If I'm crazy, it's for trying to overcome the tendency of the public to keep driving and driving regardless of the massive health & environmental costs. One reason I do this work is to warn people about dependence on long-distance food, trucked about 1,500 miles in the U.S. from farm to plate.

Not only is a little more walking and bicycling healthful, they are actually as fast or faster than driving a car when one considers all the time involved in not only driving but earning the money to buy the car, the insurance, repairs, etc.: an adjusted speed of about 5 miles per hour -- only five. But if a large car is shared, used occasionally, that would be cost-effective and more sustainable.

More roads are built than can be maintained, and annually about 40,000 people die in crashes on U.S. roads, and one million animals a day are killed. This is policy, kept in place by deep-pockets lobbyists and unimaginative leaders who ought to visit some other countries (even "poor" ones) where trains work well and people can walk easily around town centers.

I invite you to look into peak oil: the maximum point of extraction for global oil reserves. The world has reached it. We cannot drill our way out of the geological facts. (North Dakota oil is not as plentiful as touted because of extraction

issues and net-energy yield.) Unfortunately, we can't solar-panel our way out of the energy crisis either. And natural gas and fracking are beginning to be re-evaluated as not so huge and wonderful after all. Not even the tar sands' oil, an unmitigated disaster except for the profit of the few, can alter the actual trends.

What's inevitable is everyone's lifestyle change, consistent with a crashing house-of-cards economy based on unlimited expansion. Did our grandparents and their ancestors need all this "cheap" energy and toxic products to throw away? No, they were thrifty, had practical skills, honored their land, and made for stronger community. They would not have imagined that new-fangled plastics, from petroleum, would be filling the middle of ocean gyres.

You may not have known that oil prices are actually kept down in the U.S. by massive subsidies for the oil industry and the entire road infrastructure. The true cost of gasoline is more like $15 a gallon. You pay for this (and for any petroleum) in hidden ways, such as any purchases you make involving trucking, shipping, packaging, "free" parking, and maintaining the huge oil-oriented & oil-defending military.

One does not have to be an environmentalist to see that oil is nearing a dead end. The Pentagon knows it too! Caring about Americans, and all people and all life, is what we all must do when we look objectively at energy and its true costs.

There's more information at EnergyBulletin.org, TheOilDrum.com, and elsewhere. I guess you saw our Culture Change webpage Committee Against Oil Exploration (CAOE) .

Good luck, and when you've checked into these issues (more than from some TV news, corrupt politicians, talk-radio blatherers, or Facebook), please write to us again.

Jan Lundberg

Culture Change / Sail Transport Network

It is hard to know if one is talking to an impenetrable wall or someone who just needs a little straightening out. For however thorough and hopeless her confusion is -- or, hopefully, was -- the opportunity to show the the gulf between perception and reality is worth taking. Just how off base and ignorant a citizen can be, and possibly lacking in an ethical basis for evaluating profligate energy waste, points to

- the irresponsibility of the corporate news media
- the failure of politicians to tell the truth about energy
- the unlikely prospects of the U.S. population to voluntarily conserve energy and save money and lives
- modern culture's tendency to put Mother Nature's health last, as if humans are in a bubble of ingenious technological immunity from the laws of the universe

David Cundiff, MD, author of The Health Economy and The Right Medicine (that calculated the enormous health cost of fossil fuel use and car dependence) read the above exchange and said "Well said...Thanks." No doubt ranters like our friend in North Dakota need Dr. Cundiff's treatment, especially if he were a psychotherapist. Perhaps he would counsel her that the economy as presently constituted is not her friend.

* * * * *