



Times-News

The High Price of Cheap Energy

Monday, May 17, 2010

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ECO NOTES



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The Upper Big Branch mine explosion. TVA's coal ash lagoon disaster. The Deepwater Horizon blowout. In years to come these events will stand as epitaphs for the end of the Dark Ages of dirty fuel -- the moment when Americans saw the (sun)light and committed themselves to lose their addiction to fossil fuels. The death toll connected to living a fossil fuel-oriented life is palpable. One need only look at the U.S. deaths this year alone in mine explosions (31) offshore rig blowouts (12) and coal ash disasters (TBA - suspected cancer, liver damage and nervous-system disorders). The death toll worldwide this year is probably closer to over 1000 dead.

If we add to the equation the people who die as a direct consequence of dirty fuel, the true price is shocking:

* Air pollution contributes to the death of 11,000 annually in the southeast. The economic cost of air pollution due to mortality, illness, lost work, and health care costs is estimated at \$9 trillion between 1970-2000.

* Children and coal don't mix: EPA and CDC studies indicate that over 3 million children have their health significantly affected or have a learning ability as a result of lead in drinking water, mercury in fish, cadmium in shellfish, or other toxic metals from emissions.

Then, there's the economic effect of fossil fuels on society:

* The December 2008 collapse of a coal ash pond outside a Tennessee Valley Authority power plant covered 300 acres in sludge and will cost an estimated \$825 million to clean up.

* In the last twenty years, 51 large oil spills in the United States resulted in the over \$1 billion in removal costs and compensation for damages.

And the damage to industry and jobs is undisputed:

Although it's been twenty one years since the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil in the Prince William Sound, its cost to Alaska's economy continues to mount. The fishing industry has all but disappeared. The loss of the herring fishery alone has cost the region \$400 million. Given that herring is key to the marine food web, their loss also effects other fish populations, birds and mammals. The spill killed 250,000 seabirds, 2,800 sea otters, 300 harbor seals, 250 bald eagles and 22 killer whales. Numerous other species, from salmon to clams, also suffered casualties. More than 1200 miles of remote wilderness shoreline were affected. Only the river otter and bald eagle have recovered.

So where do we go from here?

The reality, according to numerous studies done by the oil industry, geologists, and government agencies is that the world is now beyond the point of "peak oil." As fossil fuel reserves continue to deplete, and the cost of retrieving oil becomes cost-prohibitive, prices will continue to spiral upwards and national economies tied to oil/gas/coal will find themselves in perpetual recession. The bright side is that human imagination and know-how can help us prepare for the only thing that makes sense: creating locally sustainable communities non-reliant on long distance trucking/shipping, foreign imports, or depletion of natural resources. WNC is uniquely situated to make this transition. With a growing green energy community and an agricultural community that can become more sustainable as it diversifies to meet new market realities, our community can lead the way.

What can we do today to take the first steps? Buy locally. Don't be confused by big box stores touting low prices. Their cheap price tag comes at a huge cost in terms of energy use, destructive environmental policies and disposable products. Eat locally. Our local farms and tailgate markets and co-ops offer healthy produce and crafts that are better for our health and put more money back into our local economy. Finally, get a home or business energy audit to help lower your energy footprint. Contact ECO for more details.

To learn more about our dirty energy past and how to create a more sustainable community, join ECO for a special program titled "Spill, Baby, Spill: Is Drilling for Oil Our Energy Future?", featuring the screening of the film, *Black Wave, The Legacy of the Exxon Valdez*, followed by a discussion on the issues raised. The program is scheduled for Tuesday, June 1st at 7:00 PM at the Henderson County Library. For more information, contact ECO at 692-0385 or online at www.eco-wnc.org.

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