

# **Green Scene: Running Close to Empty**

**by Elaine Golds**

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[Title in Tri-City News: We're running close to empty - now what?

Sub-title: Action needed on all levels to deal with our dependency on fossil fuels]

While the human race may have built a few monuments, cured a few diseases and placed a man on the moon in recent years, we remain, as we have for thousands of years, utterly reliant on plants. We eat them, wear clothing made from them and build our homes with them. We would perish within minutes without the oxygen provided by plants. For most of the past century, we have also relied on their fossilized remains to light and heat our homes, lubricate our machinery and fuel our vehicles.

Recently, President Bush admitted to his nation's addiction to oil; perhaps, it's time we should confess to ours. While the concept of a diminishing oil supply is hardly new, it is now gaining considerable credence among economists and bankers. The City of Burnaby is presently circulating a brief report titled, "Global Peak in Oil Production – the Municipal Context". It should be required reading for all of us.

Because oil is produced from the fossilized remains of plants, it's a limited resource that will run out, probably by the end of this century. Geologists believe we are approaching a peak in its supply (estimates range from 2004-2037). Almost two thirds of the world's oil is found in the Persian Gulf. Recent studies indicate about half of it has already been withdrawn – the easy and inexpensive half. The remainder will be much harder to recover. Despite improved technologies, discoveries of new oil have been declining since the 1960s. In contrast, global demand for oil continually increases. As China and other nations modernize their economies, the demand for oil will increase dramatically.

Presently, oil provides about 37% of the world's total energy needs and, of this, auto transportation accounts for about half. Although Canada is the 8th highest country in the world for per-capita energy consumption, our federal politicians have done little to develop renewable energy resources such as wind, tidal and solar power. In contrast, Sweden has promised to become oil-independent by 2020. The much-touted Alberta tar sands are not the solution. Oil can be extracted from them only by heating which consumes significant energy, requires prodigious quantities of water and emits significant greenhouse gases. The surge in oil prices provoked by Hurricane Katrina last September is just a small warning of what could happen as oil supplies become more limited. Expect political and social turmoil.

The implications of a declining oil supply mean we must change our ways. Some solutions are obvious such as increasing energy efficiency. We should be driving more fuel-efficient cars fewer kilometers than we do now. Public transit must be made more available and affordable. We should be eating food that has been grown locally rather than transported thousands of kilometers.

The Burnaby report wisely points to the need for action from all levels of government. Such actions should mesh well with goals to reduce greenhouse gas production to minimize global warming.

Municipal governments need to support higher density developments and change the shape of communities so that we become less reliant on car travel. The provincial government should be reconsidering plans for massive highway expansion. Europe has a similar quality of life to ours yet consumes less than half the energy per capita so there is little doubt that we should be able to reduce our oil consumption. If we are not part of the solution, we will be part of the problem.

For further reading on dwindling Middle Eastern oil supplies, see “Twilight in the Desert” by Matthew Simmons available from the Port Moody library. For insight into why tar sand-derived oil poses problems, read “Oil Sands Fever” on the Pembina Institute website ([www.pembina.org/pdf/publications/OilSands72.pdf](http://www.pembina.org/pdf/publications/OilSands72.pdf)). For an energy overview, I recommend Richard Heinberg’s “The Party’s Over”, found in the Coquitlam library. For some great solutions, consult the David Suzuki Foundation website ([www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org)).