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by Steve Krulick, Village of Ellenville Trustee

Pre-Oil Past as our Future? (Part 2)

"Peak Oil and Climate Change are two closely coupled forces that will shape future realities more than any other factors."

– David Holmgren, co-ordinator of the Permaculture concept

Suggestion: We should be preparing *now* for the potential impacts of peak oil, critical resource shortages, global climate chaos, and more people than the Earth can support.

To recap: one evening this decade (and it may have happened already... as early as 2005), one-half of the two trillion barrels of oil that have ever existed on Earth will have been extracted and consumed by humanity. From then on, *nothing* we can do will ever let us again extract and refine more than that *peak* amount (80-85 million barrels of oil on that one day), even as daily demand reaches and exceeds that figure. Production will then rapidly fall off from this "peak oil" zenith, as the remaining half – being the least-accessible, lowest-quality, and hardest-to-extract-and-process gunk – will become ever more expensive and less profitable to obtain (even as prices of crude and refined products skyrocket). When it requires *more* fossil energy to find, extract, transport, and refine *new* oil than the new oil itself can provide, it simply becomes pointless madness to even bother trying.

So, even before every potential drop of remaining oil *could* be wrung out of the planet (about 35 years from today, theoretically, to *absolute post-oil*), at some point before then it will cost more to get it out of the ground than to leave it (ten to twenty years from now, perhaps, to *post-available-oil*). And long before that, as oil spirals up to \$100, \$200, \$300 or more per barrel (\$5, \$8, \$10 per gallon of gasoline, or *post-cheap-oil*), and demand is even a smidgen over supply, whole economies and nations addicted to this liquid gold will be prostrate, paralyzed, and panicked, *possibly within five years*. And it won't be pretty.

Indeed, with the exception of an asteroid impact, extra-terrestrial invasion, attack by brain-eating zombies, or the apocalyptic appearance of a vengeful (or pitying) deity or avatar, ALL mundane Doomsday scenarios (lack of drinkable water, famines, plagues, nuclear or biological war over scarce resources, civic collapse, etc.) could be precipitated or greatly aggravated by Peak Oil and Climate Chaos. Alas.

If you think the gas lines of the 1970s were tough (and that was with just a *temporary* 4% downturn in production; what we are facing is a PERMANENT annual decrease in production as crude becomes harder to get out of the ground, and isn't the light, sweet variety that is easiest to refine), wait until an 85-million-plus-barrel-per-day demand (with China and India rushing to catch up to the US) faces a 75-million-bpd production cap that begins plummeting 3-8% (or more) each year. This will likely happen within the decade... and shoot downhill from there.

Even flagrant militarism – like the ironically first-named *Operation Iraqi Liberation (OIL!)* – to secure *our* petroleum (inconveniently buried under *other* peoples' lands!), will only forestall the inevitable, and set us up for scary and less-one-sided conflicts with newer oil-addicts, like China or India. Our military – already spending more than the rest of the world's

armies combined, and stretched to the breaking point to protect profits for ExxonMobil and Halliburton – is also heavily dependent on oil to function, which makes this particular strategy self-defeating and only hastens the final reckoning.

I see three phases to this scenario: first, the one we are now entering (and lasting 5-10 years), is the fading of cheap fossil fuels. Oil will still be available, but at a rapidly rising price that will impact every aspect of our oil-dependent society. What will \$300 per barrel oil mean to heating, agriculture, plastics, commuting, air travel, trucking, or shipping cheap goods from Asia? When China (which could send us into instant bankruptcy if it ever called-in its trade-imbalance notes) becomes our chief rival for oil, and stops being the manufacturing arm of Wal-Mart (whose own 12,000+ mile shipping costs, and fleet of "warehouses on wheels," with "just-in-time" truck deliveries to un-electrified big boxes, will become rapidly unsustainable; indeed, most hyperlarge corporations will likely go bust, to ultimately have their resources appropriated by those governments still functioning), we will find that all those US factories we let close over the last half-century will not be there to make up the difference.

The second phase will overlap the first, as oil becomes simply unavailable to certain countries, or regions within countries. The poorest and least powerful will be hit first, as usual, and this will likely coincide with the first large-scale effects of global climate chaos, exacerbating their sad condition.

Economics and politics will quickly become very different in just a few years as normalcy breaks down. Talk of *economic development* and *growth* and *wealth* will become meaningless as emergency meetings become focussed on scaling-down for simple *survival*, *rationing* all resources, and the forced *allocation* of land and labor... assuming governments are still in place to implement their will and enforce civil order. State and national governments will begin to shrink and crumble into feudal realms, struggling to maintain essential goods, and basic public needs such as roads, sanitation, electric grids, communications, healthcare, or even security to deal with the suddenly bereft hordes who realized too late that food doesn't *grow* in urban skyscrapers or suburban shopping malls.

At best, local governments may take over the bulk of civic functions, with county-sized entities (the distance a bicycle, horse, or electric car *could* traverse in a day) being the largest practical polity. Indeed, small, compact, walkable towns and villages – with reliable sources of pure water; arable land; capacity to generate electricity from solar, wind, or hydro; wood/peat/coal for heating; the foresight to prepare for the coming "long emergency" by developing the skills and resources needed to become more self-reliant; plus a commitment to remain civilized and trustful of the community as a whole (Kibbutznik cooperation rather than hyper-individualistic "me-firstism") – may fare better. And the Amish here, and some traditional cultures globally, may barely notice the change (to the extent they are already practicing a mostly *pre-oil* lifestyle) into which a much-reduced world population will stabilize, being the third phase.

Next, in Part 3: While the rest of the world is going to Hell, Ellenville/Wawarsing/Ulster (if we plan wisely) may only go to Heck! Life here in 2020, and what *we can do now* to minimize the pain.