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Choose All of the Above

By Kirkner

The moral of the story, at least at this past week's High Sierra Energy Summit, was to get away from the either/or approach and do it all when it comes to thinking about the world's future energy. Summit speaker, and previous Cerro Coso professor Ron Smith aptly compared the way people need to deal with energy inefficiencies with the traffic problems of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

When the Games were being planned for the City of Angels, Mayor Tom Bradley asked Games' Organizer Peter Ueberroth, who went on to become Time Magazine's Man of the Year due to the success of the L.A. Olympics, to put a call out to citizens to come up with ideas on how to deal with traffic issues that threatened to put a damper on the Games (think China dealing with the smog issue this year). Many people heeded the call and a laundry list of ideas was developed, Smith explained.

Shortly after the list was created someone asked Ueberroth what ideas and strategies he was going to use.

"We are going to do all of them because we don't have the luxury of being choosy," Ueberroth said, according to Smith.

This carries directly over into Smith's and other Summit speakers' messages about where the world needs to head from here if it hopes to stop the energy crisis that they claim is upon it.

Instead of following politicians' approaches that say if you use solar or wind, CFL light bulbs or energy efficient appliances, etc. the world needs to do all of these things and more. The overarching message needs to include things such as nuclear power as well as simple behavioral changes if energy shortfalls are to be avoided.

"We have to look at the entire picture when considering energy efficiency, not the microscopic," Smith said.

One of the biggest parts of that expanded view is to try and replace the dependence that the United States has on fossil fuels, which include crude oil and coal. Fossil fuels make up approximately 87 percent of the country's energy at this time. The biggest reason for this is that the supply of oil peaked in the 1970s in the US, and recently peaked in the world in 2005. The proof Smith gave for this still very controversial analysis was that in the last 12 months the production of oil has gone down.

"Just by a few barrels, but it's the first time ever it has gone down," Smith explained.

His message: we need to prepare for life after peak oil.

Some non-believers of this proclamation may point to oil sources such as drilling in the Arctic or the oil Canada is producing from its oil sand in Alberta. Smith, however, pointed out the flaws in both of those examples.

“If we began drilling in the Arctic we wouldn’t see much production for about five years,” he said. “Then, it would peak in about 15 years so we would be dealing with another bell-shaped curve but with a 10-year delay.” The bell-shaped curve relates to Marion Hubbert who predicted in the late 1950s that oil in the US would peak in the 1970s. When his prediction came true, the bell-shaped curve of oil became known as Hubbert’s Peak.

As for Canada’s production of oil from oil sand, Smith pointed out that this process expends more energy than it creates.

“People are touting Canada as oil’s future, but the oil there is not like the artesian wells of oil that come out of the ground flowing,” Smith said. “You have to make this oil and it takes a lot of energy.”

Between the mining, the heating, the separating, the transporting, the refining and more the process of turning oil sand into useable oil isn’t worth it, according to Smith. He did however, use production of this type of oil as another example to prove his point that oil has peaked.

“Why would you use this type of oil unless the good stuff was running out?” he questioned. Besides, with the U.S. importing 14 million barrels of oil per day, and new drilling only producing about 2 more million barrels per day, at best new drilling would make it a wash because demand will continue to increase and we will end up in the same place, he added.

Other Summit speakers like Ted Flanigan, founder and president of EcoMotion and energy and environmental consulting firm in Irvine, Calif., backed Smith up in their lectures by saying the same thing about needing to do it all in order to avoid an energy crisis.