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Tornado chaser Ron Smith puts energy into perspective

By Lara Kirkner

Ron Smith isn't your average Meteorologist/Climatologist. Ron Smith has a past. A past filled not only with three years on the San Francisco State University tornado chase team during the 1990s, but also a past filled with slowly, methodically trying to get people to realize that climate change is happening now, and has been for more than 30 years.

"It's not as dangerous as you would think, if you understand the structure," Smith said of tornado chasing, which he got involved in while taking weather classes at S.F. State.

That humble, almost cavalier attitude toward something many would find terrifying could also have been applied to Smith's first thoughts on climate change some 30 years earlier, back when he thinks change should have really begun. Yet, Smith believes, people never really understood the structure of what was happening to the Earth back then.

An astronomer and meteorologist, Smith remembers when no one paid attention to climatology, a subject he added as a minor from USC to his long list of degrees. "Once there started to be change in the climate in which we live, people started talking about ozone and carbon dioxide increases creating global warming, and talking about climate became more relevant," Smith said. "We should have, however, started talking about it years ago under Jimmy Carter."

Today he is not afraid to profess that the world is on the brink of a terrible energy crisis, which is why, even though retired from teaching, Smith has agreed to speak at the High Sierra Energy Summit for the second year in a row. As a science teacher last year at Cerro Coso College's Bishop and Mammoth campuses, Smith was asked to speak, and enjoyed it so much he is back again.

"The Summit is of great practical value and immediate need," said the Bishop resident.

While lawyers lobby for energy plans in the White House, Smith, a scientist, will be at the Summit teaching attendees how to apply green living to their own lives in ways that really make a difference.

"What you hear from politics [regarding energy issues] is not based on science," Smith said. "You are hearing from lobbyists, and 75 percent of them are lawyers. They don't know the difference between a potato chip and a computer chip."

Smith believes that not only does the country need an energy plan different from what these lobbyists are talking about, but he also believes that we are at a point today where it is too late to deal with our energy issues without some economic drama. A depression from lack of energy is what he sees in our future, once our energy supply hiccups.

"Demand equals supply right now," Smith said.

He pointed to oil and Hubbert's Peak as the perfect example. In the 1950s, Marion King Hubbert predicted that oil peaks in the United States would be reached by the 1970s. Hubbert stated that the large oil fields would be found first and the smaller fields

found later would not be able to keep up with demand. Oil production for any geographical region, he said, would resemble a bell curve. At the time Hubbert was laughed out of the lab, but later his prediction came true.

“Today we have plateaued,” Smith said. “World demand for oil is increasing, but productivity is static. China is now following our poor example and basing their future on fossil fuels, too.”

Smith’s solution is easy: conserve more...quite the opposite of that advocated by oil industry lobbyists. He hopes to boil ideas down to practical uses at this year’s Summit. “A lot of people can’t afford to do big things like buy a hybrid to help conserve, but there are many little practical things they can do,” Smith said. “For example, just ratcheting down the temperature of your hot water heater saves a lot. In home energy use, one third to one half goes to heat water.”

Listen to Smith this week, Aug. 11-15, during the High Sierra Energy Summit. His lecture, “Meteorology Overview—Putting Energy In Perspective,” begins each morning at 8:30 a.m. Smith plans to cover different topics every day.