



Pregnancy revisited or some thoughts on coal

Posted by [Heading Out](#) on March 29, 2006 - 12:48am

Topic: [Supply/Production](#)

Tags: [coal](#), [crooked timber](#), [ezra klein](#), [hirsch report](#), [peabody](#), [sme](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Wandering, not quite by chance, into a luncheon meeting today, I listened while a VP of Peabody (the largest coal mining company) casually mentioned, in passing, the arrival of Peak Oil. His talk dealt largely with the need that this will generate for coal, and the market, and the need for engineers that this engenders. It was, you might say, a pleasant talk, given to an audience "in the trade" and his aim was to talk about the growing opportunities in the business and to re-assure those with long memories, that this time the market would be sustained for a long time.

What I thought notable was that the audience did not seem to grasp the impact that peak oil is going to have on the industries that, while related, do not themselves mine coal. For them the market price and lesser availability of liquid fuels to give the power to their operations, will mean a significant increase in operational cost, and more pressure to be competitive, at a time when the market might otherwise appear glowing.

For much of the fossil materials extraction business the energy cost of operations has not, in large measure, been a major factor in controlling their production. Much of the rock has been fragmented by chemical energy (explosives), where the EROEI equation becomes somewhat more difficult to generate. And while modern methods are increasingly using mechanical excavation, rather than explosives, it hasn't really been necessary to evaluate, to date, the change in the overall energies required. Nor has the change, and the resulting higher potential costs been factored into plans to make the operation more efficient. The rising costs of liquid energy are likely now to make those considerations significantly more important, and should lead to much closer evaluation of the technology and development of new ideas, some perhaps outside the box, to get the same amount of value from the ground, but at a lower energy cost.

It would be comforting to be able to say that there is now a plan to deal with this. But the planning at the DoE had been to build this into concepts for the [Mining Industry of the Future](#). That program, modest though it was, has now been zeroed out, and is gone, the experts moving to other fields. Where now the funds for innovation?

Which was, where I came in. Where the prevalent attitude was "Don't be silly, if it worked for our grandfathers it should be good enough for us, right!" In token of which it would also appear that the premier organization for spreading knowledge among the mining community (SME) is about to try emulating that odd bird in the Headmaster's study at Hogwarts. In the meanwhile, suggestions for change might perhaps be most fruitfully stacked around the corpse so as intensify the fire and speed the change. There appears to be little audience for a more creative approach. An attitude which, I learn from [Yankee's post](#) is also held by some of our esteemed blogging colleagues.

I wrote the above before seeing Yankee's post, and the direction to [Crooked Timber](#) and [Ezra](#)

[Klein](#). Those posts are in line with my opening, that these are wonderful days for the coal industry. But unfortunately they completely confuse electric power generation and liquid/gaseous fuel use.

Neither author appears to understand the meaning of the [Hirsch report](#). We have 200 million cars and light trucks in this country - give or take - and they run on gasoline and diesel. You can't change them to electric cars in less than about 20 years. We cannot generate significant auto fuels from coal for these cars in less than around 15 years given the time for permits and plant construction. The crisis is likely to be upon us within the next five years (as I said even Peabody agrees with this). Folks we don't have time, there aren't enough engineers and thinking outside the box is not allowed. If I knew their address I think I would be tempted to send some sand (oil of course) to our timbered and learned friends and suggest they bury their heads in it a little deeper.

Now this is not to say that there are not ideas that can provide some answers, but, as I've said before "you can't have a baby in a month by making nine women pregnant!" Those who have to solve these problems (are there many of us left?) might be getting a bit tired of the old saw that we have chatted about before that "technology will solve the problem." Without money, personnel and time it sure won't, and right now we don't have them (the Governor of Montana not withstanding).

Ah, well, it seems I might be getting a bit hot under the collar, and so it is time for HO to take a small break and to return to the land where the wind no longer [blows free](#) and [gas is not](#). I wish I could promise that posting would continue with some regularity, but as have found for the past few years trying to find a hotel with wireless along the wall that Hadrian built is largely an exercise in futility. Which I suppose is an excuse to spend a week on another hobby - the search for a good pint!



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](#).