



Impressions of ASPO-USA

Posted by [Dave Cohen](#) on October 29, 2006 - 8:31pm

Topic: [Miscellaneous](#)

Tags: [aspo-usa](#), [peak oil](#) [[list all tags](#)]

[Update by Dave Cohen on 10/29/06 at 7:31 PM EDT]

I forgot to add that M. King Hubbert Awards from ASPO-USA went to Richard Heinberg and Congressman Roscoe Bartlett (R, MD). Congratulations to them for their realistic views of our future. It's good to see everyone contributing their conference impressions here.

This is not a full conference report but rather gives some of my impressions of the [ASPO-USA](#) conference held this week at Boston University.

About 450 people attended but I thought the absence of journalists was notable. There were a few but a [protest](#) got more attention in the press than anything else. For the mainstream media, peak oil is, temporarily, off the table. This is understandable due to the negative publicity blitz we've experienced over the last few months, combined with the steep fall of the oil price. Nevertheless, the fundamental issues are still there, a point the conference brought home to its attendees. The crowd is quite diverse, although ASPO-USA tends to focus on the troublesome details in oil & natural gas production, the problems with bringing substitutes onstream and geopolitical concerns.

At this kind of conference, you can sit at your table all day and listen to all the presentations—this is like a rewarding endurance contest. But what I like to do is talk to people informally out in the hallway. So, sometimes I missed talks (sometimes unintentionally). However, I count on the presentation slides being up on the ASPO-USA website next week. [Greg Geyer](#) of Terrachord will perform this great service for all of us.

So, in no particular order, here are my impressions and observations as filtered through my own sense of what is interesting or important. Others will add their own observations.

- First, I want to congratulate the conference organizers for a job well-done. I can't name them all but they're great folks. One can only imagine the hard work that goes into organizing such a thing. Everything went pretty smoothly although I will say, there are only 24 hours in a day!
- I was forcefully reminded that although peak oil is often seen as a *liquid fuels* problem, there is also the electrical power grid to worry about. The issues include *storage* of electrical power generated from wind, solar and other renewables, natural gas production declines, the great worries associated with using more pulverized coal, the problems with *electricity dispatch* to meet demand in a timely manner at low costs, et. al. I want to write more about this in the future.
- [Dave Hughes](#) of The Geological Survey of Canada was a new—to me— forceful voice in the

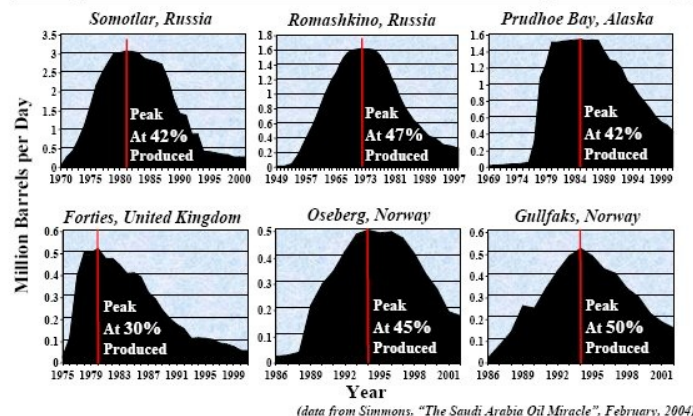
peak oil debate. He spoke knowledgeably and convincingly about natural gas problems in North America and the was realistic in his assessments of what we can expect from the tar sands of Alberta. Between the natural gas problems, the enormous environmental damage, the soaring capital costs, the [problems with water & dilutants](#) for mined bitumen, there is little reason to be confident about the operation. Indeed, using natural gas for tar sands production is like "turning gold into lead" as Hughes said. From [here](#)—



Typical Oil Sands Tailings Ponds
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- A message that needs to get out to people is that when you look at a typical oil field's production history—

Peaking Profiles of Giant and Super Giant Fields at 30-50% of Total Production Suggests Peaking of World Production at 83% of Ultimate Recoverable Consumed is Wishful Thinking



Field Production Profiles
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there arrives a point of diminishing returns based on your marginal extraction costs at the tail-end of production. At some point, it is simply no longer economic to extract any more oil because the EOR or IOR techniques being applied are more expensive than what you can get for what you produce. This is an EROEI issue concerning what are termed *boundaries*—what do you include when you calculate the net energy? Several speakers touched on these issues.

- NIMBY-ism is a large issue for LNG receiving terminals and [wind farms](#). Brad Swing,

director of Boston's Energy Policy division, told the attendees what happens everytime an LNG tanker moves into the Everett terminal. 72 different agencies "swing" into action. Flights are *suspended* at Boston's Logan Airport. It was an astonishing story. The aforementioned protest was not about Jim Gordon's Cape Wind Project (he spoke), but resistance is still strong to the project. Where do people, especially in New England, think their future electricity will come from? I've got news for them—it doesn't just come out of the wall when you flip the switch on.

- We had a sleight-of-hand magic show courtesy of a very corporate pitch from Raytheon's John Cogliandro. Here, we will not mine the oil shale nor will be heat it up using Shell's *in situ* method. No, in this case we will [microwave it in the ground](#) and use supercritical fluids to coax the heated liquids out of the ground. Hyperbole was high but details were scarce. Stay tuned!
- Speaking with Michael Klare in the hallway, he reiterated his belief that some military action will be taken against Iran in the coming year. I will be doing an interview with him soon — the one I scheduled fell through — and there will be an article here on it. I note that there are now no less than *three* aircraft carrier task forces in the area now. Uhhmm....
- The transportation section at the conference had its moments. The speakers & panelists were [John Heywood](#) of MIT, [Bill Reinert](#) of Toyota and [Andy Frank](#) of UC Davis. Frank presented an interesting vision of the future in which most everyone has a PHEV with a small engine running on biofuel. Electricity generated from renewables on the grid is stored by plugging in your car at night -- your car's battery does the trick. Disappointingly, there was no official discussion of electrified light rail and other railroad options. Reinert said something interesting about how inefficient [aggressive driving](#) is, aside from the fact that it indicates that people often act like sociopaths in their vehicles.

I shall mention other personal impressions in the comments on this thread. But the above list is certainly enough to chew on.

Finally, a little about The Oil Drum. My colleagues Stuart Staniford (British, now of San Francisco), Cry Wolf (Aberdeen, Scotland), Chris Vernon (Bristol, England) and Nate Hagens (New Hampshire) were all there. It was a great pleasure to finally meet them all (I had met Stuart previously). I can tell you that the TOD table at the bar on Friday night was definitely the place to be. I've hardly ever laughed that hard in my life. We did not find any recoverable oil but there was wine in abundance, so we partook of that instead. What smart, funny, knowledgeable people they all are. I can not drink Cry Wolf under the table but it wasn't due to lack of effort.

More seriously, The Oil Drum was considered a precious resource by most everyone at the conference. Most attendees read us on a regular basis including most of the presenters as well. That was startling and a little bit intimidating. At one point, Randy Udall had us and some people from some other websites like the [Energy Bulletin](#) stand up and get a round of applause from the conference attendees. It was a totally unexpected but much appreciated gesture. All of your good work, both from contributors and commenters, is helping to change the world. So, keep it up!

Dave Cohen
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