



## The One-Month Pregnancy

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There is a growing realization that we are heading into troubled water, and that this time we won't have the oil to pour on it (sorry, couldn't resist). The recent [Federal Energy Information Administration report](#) that the supply will be short 700,000 barrels a day, due to the Chinese increase in flow to their strategic reserve, suggests that the crisis will indeed become dramatically evident during the fourth quarter of this year.

There are a number of suggestions that can be made as to ways the extra demand might be met, and how new technologies may be developed to spring into the breach. There is also the fallback positions that either "The Government knows all about this and will take care of it," or "where there is a need technology always finds an answer."

My usual response to the latter is that you can't have a baby in a month by making nine women pregnant. Technological innovation takes time, and the introduction of new answers must be validated through steps that are each of significant temporal length.

I remember Dixie Lee Ray being asked about this during the last crisis and she pointed out that even if that miraculous silver bullet technology (the candidate at the time may have been cold fusion) had already been validated in a test tube in some laboratory, that it would take over 20 years before it would have any significant impact on US energy supply. The reason is that initial experiments have to be validated, then designed for, and approved at a larger - bench scale, and run at that scale, and then the process must be repeated at a prototype scale with permits being obtained and construction approved, and funding found, and then again the process must be run for some time to ensure it works at that level. Then an initial pilot plant must be developed through the same process, and then the first full-scale plant. If each of those processes takes a finite number of years, you may understand how quickly she reached the 20-year time to significant impact.

So here we are with an evident crisis coming, and a global economy that is totally oriented around oil. Yes we can mix 5-micron coal with water and run diesel engines, but we don't have that many diesels and we don't have any cheap way to grind the coal that small. So we need to be a little realistic about looking at what options are available. And the options are either find better ways of getting the oil that we are leaving in the ground out, or destroy demand by increasing the price until less of the world can afford it. Without a large effort to immediately find ways to achieve the former (remembering that a lot of the experts who looked at things like oil shale in the past are now retired, in other work or dead) we are going to be left with the second choice. And by default, given that the crisis is about to arrive by the Government's own reports, it looks as though the decision has been made for us. So the next question is one we have posed before, how much will you have to pay for gas before you start to seriously cut back on your driving, and what will you give up to cover that cost?

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