



ASPO-USA Conference, Final Thoughts

Posted by [Heading Out](#) on October 19, 2010 - 8:11am

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The remark that sticks most in my mind, as I look back on this year's ASPO-USA Conference was one that I believe totally missed the underlying Conference message. It was Ralph Nader, the speaker at the final luncheon, who trying to encourage action, noted the likelihood of our still debating the same topic at the meeting ten or fifteen years from now. The chances of the happening are slim to none. If by that time there has not been an oil peak, with all its subsequent impacts, the Association will have lost any claim to be able to predict reality, and likely will no longer be having meetings. On the other hand, and the evidence was increasingly evident and worrisome, if the peak comes, then the group that met in Washington will have moved on to the equally worrisome topic of trying to predict how fast the decline in liquid fuels will be, and the impact. So we won't be still talking about the same stuff.

And yet the tenor of the meeting felt different this year. I remember the excitement of going to Denver five years ago to meet the first group of folk that had the same concerns about future fuel supply that I did. I remember the video cameras, the emotional reaction when I realized that there were a significant number of folk, more knowledgeable than I, who had facts to substantiate an early rather than late date for Peak Oil to occur. Five years have passed. The intervening time has seen global oil use reach a rough plateau along which it has bounced. But the end to that plateau is now coming in the near future. This will make that future much darker than the present, and likely a lot of people are going to be hurt. Yet the mood at the meeting seemed more complacent, even as the message is becoming more urgent. Perhaps we have been talking to ourselves too long, for as the message becomes clearer, the reaction seems to lessen.

The Liquid Fuels problem (though there are concerns also over the effective supplies of energy as a whole) is not an immediately visible crisis. Yes, the price of crude oil has gone up, but it is now held (largely through an adjustment of the exports from a very few Middle Eastern countries) at a relatively steady price. As long as that reserve exists and is used, as it is now, the world can adjust to the current price and continue about its ways.

But the day when the carousel stops is almost at hand. The predictions at the meeting seem to increasingly focus on the 2012-2014 time frame. That begins to impact the next national elections. The price of crude will continue a slow ratchet up, that quickens towards the end of next year (there was at least one prediction that it will be back in treble digits by then). The slow growth of the crisis, partially because of the continued ill-health of the economies of the world, means that there are other more pressing topics of seeming more important concern. And so the meeting drew less attention than it should.

ASPO-USA is moving to Washington to seek more influence, but I suspect that the dawning awareness of the problem over the next eighteen months will do more to bring the group to

national attention. What is needed is an underpinning of facts that explain some of the root causes of the problem, why it isn't going to go away, and some of the resulting problems that are going to arise in the future. Plus of course the need to continue to work the numbers to better be able to estimate how bad it is going to get.

Robert Hirsch talked about what he has done to prepare – he knows it is coming and is getting ready – but I wonder how many other folks are? It has, to some, become almost an abstract topic, somewhat displaced from day-to-day reality in the way that some meetings change. We talk about the evidence, yes its getting stronger, and the dates are getting closer (even faster than that just due to time having passed) and yes the impacts could be severe, but

I remember coming away from my last ASPO-USA Conference thinking I should talk to the mayor and council where I live. But it was still a few years from a crisis, and as someone said “if it won't happen in this term, why should I worry, I might not be elected when it happens and so I won't have to be concerned.” Well that isn't true any longer. Those now being elected will begin to see the problem in their next term. The excuses for inaction are running out.

(Oh, and my wife, my eldest son and I drive hybrid cars. I spent the weekend before the Conference stacking wood for our tile stove. I have solar roll on the roof, and the house has been re-insulated. Living rurally I am loath to move nearer shops and we effectively have little public transport.)

The evidence is stronger, more folk are becoming aware of it, the likelihood of significant mitigating measures being implemented are growing less, but, for a short while longer, we are off the public screens. But that will likely soon change – as earlier periods of awareness show, people do want web sites that can keep them informed, conferences that bring together folk that can build the encompassing picture of what is happening.

Unfortunately, as the Gulf oil spill showed, the current Administration thinks it can exist without much of that expertise. (The decisions were made by an overseeing panel assembled by the Secretary of Energy that did not contain a whole lot of Petroleum Engineering expertise, by number of members.) It, sadly, takes time for those who don't know the facts, or have the background knowledge, to be brought up to speed. So our role hasn't gone away. It has actually become more important, and so we must continue to do what we do, until recognition comes. That it likely won't be long coming is not necessarily good news.



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