



Moving Forward - Towards A Kinder Gentler (Smaller) Oil Drum

Posted by [nate hagens](#) on November 26, 2010 - 3:05pm

Topic: [Site news](#)

For the past 5 years, The Oil Drum has been a home base for many high level discussions about the details and implications surrounding an early peak in global crude oil production as well as topics on society and energy in general. The entire site was started, and continued, by volunteers, in what might be described as a loose anarchy glued by social capital and a desire to puzzle solve the complexities surrounding energy depletion. Over time, on these pages, our contributing staff and especially the many readers who joined the discussions, have pushed the envelope in publicly analyzing what was/is one of the central issues of our time - the opportunities and constraints facing society during the upcoming energy transition.

In many ways our initial mission is over. The fact that oil depletion is real and urgent is no longer a 3+ standard deviation viewpoint (see recent IEA World Energy Outlook). However, thorough understanding of the nuances and importance of energy in our lives is still not widespread. Our plans on how best TOD can play a role in the ongoing energy debate, are below the fold.

The Oil Drum was started in 2005 by Kyle Saunders and Dave Summers. Over time the "staff" of volunteers grew to around 25. Since 2005 we've highlighted almost 7,000 posts, have had over 30 million visits and almost 70 million page views. TOD has been the premier destination for analysis and perspective on a near term peak in oil production.

Because of our (unexpected) popularity in the first couple years, it was decided that TOD required a corporate parent for liability reasons. Also, it was necessary to undergo the 501(c)(3) process, which enabled us to receive that tax-deductible donations that cover the operating costs. The Institute for the Study of Energy and Our Future (ISEOF) was thus incorporated in October 2007. At that time, the three people spending the most time on steering the content and the public interface of the site were Kyle Saunders, David Goldberg (Super G) and myself. These three became the initial Board Members of the 501(c)(3). There will be changes/additions to this Board before year end.

For the past two years we have struggled with what The Oil Drum might become as global resource events accelerated, and the non-peak oil aware caught on to the arguments presented here in the early years. Over a year ago I wrote about the difficulties of very thoughtful people suddenly feel pressure to shift from being [analysts to activists](#). Additionally, and more subtly, though energy underpins nearly everything in society, the financial crisis caused (and will likely cause again), concerns about energy to be taken off the front burner for long periods. In considering the best path going forward, we realized we can no longer attempt to have content on all aspects of societal change, at risk of diluting the value of the things we are good at writing about. Furthermore, this is a part-time gig for all of us, so we had to consider how we might still enjoy and find meaning in our analysis, but do so in non-stressful, more sustainable ways.

Given the fire hydrant of information and front burner issues currently facing societies, it is easy to try to do everything, because a great deal needs to be accomplished. I see three main needs that the energy limits community can fill going forward - 1) continued documentation and analysis

of energys role in society - how much we have left, what are decline rate, what are new technologies, what are environmental, social costs etc. 2) efforting on physical plans to support/mitigate changes in our just-in-time global production/delivery systems that have been dependent on cheap fossil fuels, themselves dependent on cheap credit, and 3) synthesizing all the disparate aspects supply and demand side science into a new more sustainable future human system - a blueprint that all or parts of might eventually be implemented.

All these areas are important, but as it pertains to *this* website, the issue kind of boiled down to 'what can we do' as opposed to 'what should we do' or 'want to do'. In envisioning a successful way forward, we started with a tabula rasa and considered what TOD might accomplish at this juncture of energy depletion/awareness. We have a choice between presenting interesting, newsy information for consumption by the energy/big picture savvy, or trying to present aspects of energy analysis and perspective that can be used as building blocks by future decision-makers, irrespective of how the financial/currency situation resolves. Historically, The Oil Drum was at its best when we presented raw energy analysis that was then honed, defended or discarded via the "TOD meat grinder." We would like to continue this tradition and remain a credible web portal for energy discussion going forward. Towards that goal, here is an overview of the main changes that are underway. (A more formal document with details will be forthcoming):

1. A return to an energy focus - Though we will still include content on how energy interrelates with the economy, ecology and social systems, the main focus will be on energy (as opposed to *just* financial, or environmental, or political) content. (E.g. posts on Chilean miner rescues or chicken farming will likely no longer be posted but articles on how high of energy costs an economic system can afford, with what sort of environmental externalities, will be.)

2. Quality over quantity - We will aim for fewer but in general higher quality posts, and hope that a raising of the bar will attract new writers/analysts with a wide range of energy expertise. We will also (largely due to request of Leanan, but also consistent with "smaller print", will go down to 3-4 Drumbeats per week, instead of 7. There will also be a space for current event topics that are deemed appropriate

3. A large editorial board, steering and approving content - A continual workload for 1 or 2 editors becomes a) too focused and b) too much work. We are going to an 8 person editorial board, growing over time. Also, 2 new paid positions will assist writers with image, content formatting and editorial needs.

4. Moderated community comments - The signal to noise ratio in the comments is in decline, partially due to the passage of time and no clear standards in this forum. This will also require a paid staff (that we are hiring outside of TOD).

There will be a new [Mission Statement for The Oil Drum](#) up shortly. (It is largely similar to the original one from 2005.) The proposed changes will start with new editorial procedures, outlined below.

The Oil Drum content guidelines and editorial process

The Oil Drum is a web community that seeks to facilitate civil, evidence-based discussions about energy and its impacts on the future of human societies, and to serve as a leading online knowledge-base about energy-related topics.

Conventional political, economic and media institutions still do not recognize energy's role as a key contributor to human societies, and its importance as a driver for all of our physical processes and economic transactions. The Oil Drum aims to ensure that

sufficient knowledge is available to society and that information about energy-related issues finds a platform with high scientific and ethical standards.

The following guidelines have been established in order to maintain a high quality of content and discussion and foster a civil dialogue consisting of evidence-based reasoning and logical arguments.

1. Standards for article subject matter

The Oil Drum features a wide range of content and opinion related to energy and the connection between energy and society. This includes:

- Energy extraction, generation, conversion and storage technologies (e.g., advantages, disadvantages, progress, externalities, EROI, cost, long-term availability).
- Energy application technologies (e.g., transportation, processes, space heating, etc.).
- Energy systems integration (e.g., electricity grids, supply chains for transportation fuels, etc.) and transitions.
- Implications of transformation of energy systems to societies, including discussions about limits, societal EROI, demand drivers, and other relevant aspects.
- Thought-provoking opinions about the future of societies, provided that there is a clear connection to energy issues.

2. Standards for article quality

The Oil Drum explicitly seeks to provide a platform for a variety of perspectives that may differ and contradict each other, leaving readers to judge the value of an article by comparing and integrating it with other information. Thought-provoking and non-mainstream ideas are encouraged, so long as they are well-argued. Content should conform to the following guidelines:

- As described in Section 1, articles should mainly revolve around energy, though may include a focus on energy's connection to society as a whole.
- Article content should consist of data from clearly identified sources and logical reasoning. Results should be reproducible by interested readers.
- Articles should not be marketing material or written with the direct purpose of marketing technologies, products or services.
- Opinion pieces should be clearly identified as such, and are intended to provoke thought and provide readers with interesting philosophical questions as opposed to prescriptive answers or speculative predictions.
- Ideally articles should strive to meet as many of following adjectives as possible: **Energy related, original, credible, relevant, concise, logical, neutral tone, non 'in group' language, and 'better' (if exploring similar subject as prior TOD posts).**

It is understood that people write here because they are passionate about a certain topic of relevance to the energy debate. As such the editors will use the above list as initial filters, but no post will likely fit all criteria -we're just trying to upgrade quality and in return keep the content on the frontpage for a longer period than previously.

3. Contributors

The Oil Drum has a volunteer rotating staff of editors and contributors who write articles for the site on a regular basis. Guest contributions that meet the criteria for content and clarity are also welcome and will be encouraged in the future. A meta-list of topics that our current staff doesn't have the skillset or resources to address will be posted shortly.

4. Editorial process

- The Oil Drum aims to publish two to three articles each week. The number of articles published will to some extent be determined by the availability of content that meets the editorial standards.
- Ideally articles should be between 1,000 and 3,000 words long. Longer articles are acceptable, but the editors may decide to split these articles into two or more parts.
- Each article must be approved by three editors before it is published.
- **[Ed. note, corrected 11/27 1p EST]** If three editors disapprove of an article, it will not be published.
- If an article receives three approvals *and* three disapprovals, a discussion among the editors will be facilitated. If no consensus can be reached, the article in question will not be published.
- Guest submissions will be routed into a separate queue where staff members can choose to "take ownership" of them and guide them through the publication process.

The new editorial Board will initially be comprised of:

Arthur Berman, Hannes Kunz, Rembrandt Koppelaar, Brian Maschoff (Joules Burn), Euan Mearns, David Summers (Heading Out), Gail Tverberg, and Chris Vernon. It is expected this board will grow over time.

5. Comment monitoring and management

We are moving towards moderated comments. This does not mean comments will stack up in a queue, but that inappropriate content will be removed shortly after its posting. We will not moderate comments on content being right or wrong, but will remove comments that are: 1) off topic, 2) spam/product marketing, 3) personal attacks, 4) religious or political screeds, 5) excessive "thread hogging". I.e. it is possible that very few comments will be removed. But this is deemed necessary to retain a high "signal to noise" ratio. More details will be posted soon.

An intelligent national/global energy debate is still sorely needed. Even though there is increasing recognition about a near term peak in oil production, there is still little awareness that 1) energy is needed for every good produced in our economies, 2) that energy is treated the same as every other input to the production function in our institutions: (i.e. energy is perfectly substitutable) and 3) that it takes other natural resources, including energy itself, to procure energy. These are important things to explore and understand. TOD, both its contributing writers, and the energy community that hangs out here, can still play a role in better understanding and communicating these and related issues.

The plans articulated above are the result of months of discussions among the key people involved with TOD and are considered the most likely to be sustainable and impactful. I expect not everyone will be happy about these changes— some will be concerned our content will become

overly boring. I would rebut that being exciting and novel for readers is not necessarily correlated with being productive/helpful for broader society. Others will argue that complexity and therefore accuracy is lost when focusing on energy and de-emphasizing interconnected topics such as finance, debt, ecology, the environment, social equity, and politics, etc. I happen to agree with these people. But if every discussion ends up bringing in all aspects of our societal system, it often quickly becomes either an "inside conversation" of interest only to an elite few, or attracts so many polarized viewpoints that the same circular unproductive arguments are the end result of each thread. Neither of these outcomes ends up being productive.

In conclusion of this overview, I'd like to thank all of the people that have volunteered their time here during the past 5 years, especially David Goldberg, Kyle Saunders, Gail Tverberg and Leanan. I'd also like to thank all the bright, civically motivated minds who have made the discussion threads here second to none - I hope many of you continue to visit, learn and contribute on these pages. The open community model that made The Oil Drum such a special place is not going away - just being streamlined and hopefully more manageable and sustainable. Despite the increasing recognition of global energy constraints, there still is an analysis and perspective gap between the Wall St and for-profit energy agencies, and the quick on their feet social vantage point analysis found here. I think, with help from the civically motivated in this community, we still can fill a niche writing about all things energy, in credible, interesting and relevant ways that are faster than a peer review journal but also deeper and more impactful than conventional media.



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