

Regionalize Agriculture Now to Prepare for Higher Oil Prices

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With a 5% increase in the cost of food over the past year, fuel has been recognized as a key contributor. How should we respond to the record-breaking rise in oil prices? Let's start by recognizing that despite volatility and occasional drops, it's not temporary. The cause is not financial speculation, but a fundamental change in supply and demand. World demand for petroleum continues to rise, and is already surpassing world oil production. Many analysts expect world oil production to peak and begin permanent decline by 2010. Whether oil production peaks or plateaus, the gap between supply and demand will keep growing, leading to continued price increases and volatility. Oil is predicted to rise to \$200 or \$300 a barrel - or higher.

The solution is not to drill for more oil in the U.S. or to ask Saudi Arabia to pump more, since neither option can yield enough oil to make a substantial difference. Pretending otherwise hoaxes voters and wastes valuable time. Since we can't lower oil prices, we must lower oil use as fast as possible, by conserving, radically increasing efficiency, and using energy-smart technology. Acknowledging the full scope of our energy dilemma is not pleasant, but only by sharing the complete narrative will be able to generate the broad public support to dispel illusory solutions, implement effective responses, and buckle up our seatbelts before we hit the potholes ahead of us. NYC, as a financial and media center, can leverage national progress.

Public opinion studies show that despite growing public awareness, Americans still don't perceive climate change as urgent. Initiatives based on the threat of climate change are seen as optional, and get a lot of resistance. However, sustainable energy policies dealing with higher energy prices, national security and climate change at the same time can get broad public support.

Let's start by revising plans and budgets. Convening an Energy Price Task Force to study future energy price and supply scenarios, as has been done by San Francisco and Portland, Oregon, would identify ways to minimize the impact of higher prices. Such legislation is being introduced in the NYC Council, but business and civic leaders, planners, and advocates should begin exploring these topics immediately.

Next, let's create contingency plans for price spikes and fuel shortages. They could occur gradually, or rapidly, through political turmoil, such as an attack on Iran closing off oil shipments through the Straits of Hormuz. In 2004 the NYC Council considered but didn't act on an energy shortage contingency plan that would set up stages for emergency responses and procedures to quickly cut energy use. New City sustainability initiatives will have gradual effects and don't address this type of situation. However, the NYC Office of Emergency Management (OEM) has no public plans for such events either.

While building support for PlaNYC, we need to simultaneously push discussion far past PlaNYC goals and start building a post-petroleum economy now. To make clean energy cheap, we'll have to restore domestic manufacturing, which will create millions of green jobs that can't be outsourced. We must scale up solar and wind power, and resist the temptation to make liquid fuels from coal, tar sands or oil shale, which would accelerate climate change, and can't replace more than a fraction of our petroleum use anyway. Corn-based ethanol can't be scaled up and is a boondoggle, and cellulosic biofuel is still experimental. We'll have to use

existing transportation as efficiently as possible, build as much mass transit and rail as we can, and power transportation increasingly with electricity.

We must sharply increase local and regional food production. Food in the U.S. travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from farm to table, using lots of fuel not only in transportation, but through production of fertilizers and pesticides, pumping water, processing and refrigeration. We should not only expand farmers markets, backyard food gardening and CSAs, but to provide affordable food for NYC, we'll have to rebuild New York State's agricultural capacity. Farmers should be supported with financial incentives and training programs. NYC institutions like schools and hospitals should be required to purchase a substantial percentage of their food from within New York State.

We already have technologies and policies that can respond to both climate change and fuel depletion, but must build massive public demand for their implementation. As we work together to focus the NYC food policy landscape in both the work of the FSNYC and work the UFCW Building Blocks Project, let's advocate for bold expansion of sustainable agriculture as part of an effort to completely change the American energy conversation. *For details, read "Sustainable Energy Independence for NYC," a report from Sierra Club NYC at www.beyondoilnyc.org.*