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Opinion

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A fit of (oil) peak

IT'S THE END of the world as we know it, and we feel fine.

Let us explain.

The last few months have seen a surge of stories on so-called "peak oil." That's the moment when we're pulling as much oil out of the ground as we'll ever be able to pump. Supply hits its peak and begins an inexorable decline, regardless of demand. Hurricane Katrina has shown what kind of damage short-term supply disruptions can do; peak oil represents long-term and permanent supply disruption.

But peak oil is not a matter of economics or politics. It's cold, hard geology.

Nobody knows for sure when the peak will occur. Estimates range from a few years ago to 50 years hence. But expert consensus is closing in on the next five to 15 years.

This isn't a Y2K bug situation; the exact moment we hit the peak isn't that important. What really matters is how we handle the descent. The difficulty it poses is incredibly complex but simply stated: Our entire economy hinges on the availability of cheap oil.

Think about food and transport. Our agricultural system depends on petroleum-based fertilizers and petro-fuel to haul

the resulting food over vast distances. And oil powers our transportation system — not just personal vehicles, but city buses, long-haul trucks, airplanes, and ocean freighters.

Right now, the price of a barrel of oil is hovering around \$70. But what's going to happen when it hits \$80? \$100? \$200? Opinions are sharply divided.

On one side, the Chicken Little Brigade says the end of cheap oil will cause an abrupt worldwide economic crash, casting civilization into violence and turmoil. The lucky ones might escape with a modest agrarian life, carving tools by candlelight and wondering what would have happened on the next season of "Desperate Housewives."

On the other side, the Ostrich Brigade says the free market will handle the transition smoothly. No need to fret. Now return to your SUV and back away slowly.

Both perspectives are flawed. The coming disruptions are not inevitably catastrophic, so we can't just sit back and await the Apocalypse. But the world's influence-ridden energy markets are any-

thing but "free," so we can't just sit back and wait for things to work themselves out either. The only question is whether we participate actively or passively.

If you haven't already spent it at the pump, you can bet your bottom dollar that the oil industry, special interests, and big political contributors of every stripe will be squarely in the "Active" column. And your best interests will not necessarily

top their agenda.

So it's time for us ordinary citizens to get active, too. Time to call our legislators, show up at city council meetings, write letters to the editor. After all, everyday Americans outnumber energy company executives by a ratio of roughly a bazillion to one — so let's make sure the dialogue reflects that, and that our needs get proportionate attention.

What should you be lobbying for, with your political action committee of one?

Smarter transportation. This is the low-hanging fruit of a smart, post-peak energy economy. Push for lighter, more fuel-efficient cars and alternative fuels.

Decentralized power. Our electricity supply is highly central-

ized and inefficient. Every volt we use travels over miles of cable, making it vulnerable to technical failure, price manipulation, and terrorist attack. Demand an electricity grid built from clean, community-level energy sources like wind, solar, geothermal, and combined heat and power systems.

Honest, responsible industries. Our nation's gasoline prices are artificially suppressed. Remove oil subsidies and tax breaks, and make sure oil companies, not taxpayers, pick up the bill for externalities like pollution-related healthcare and climate disruption.

A level playing field. Big agribusiness relies on heavy government subsidies. Remove them, and watch agriculture follow energy in cleaning up and decentralizing.

These ideas would make the trip down the oil peak a little smoother, but they're only a beginning. Maybe you have other, better ideas. If so, speak up. Now's the time to have the conversation, before we wander into a crisis.

The world as we know it is ending, whether or not we're prepared. But with your help — that is, with involvement, commitment, and ingenuity — we'll be fine.

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