



Statement to the San Francisco Commission on the Environment

San Francisco's economic vitality is intimately tied to petroleum and its related product, natural gas. These two energy sources underpin every aspect of modern life: they fuel our vehicles and electric plants and are essential for producing everything from fertilizers to pharmaceuticals. But petroleum is ceasing to be a cheap and plentiful resource. Supply lines are precarious and global production is projected to decline, with ramifications that could undermine the foundations of our well-being if we head into this transition unprepared. Given that our existence as a functional city depends on access to the remaining petroleum—access that is determined by political and geological forces outside of local control—city government urgently needs to address this issue.

Petroleum and natural gas play many essential roles in the everyday functioning of San Francisco. Petroleum-derived fuels move the people that drive the city's economy, move food and consumer goods into the city, truck solid waste out of the city, and power emergency vehicles. Half of all the electricity generated in California comes from natural gas-fired plants. Virtually every item we use every day requires petroleum at some point in its manufacture or distribution. Our food is typically grown using natural gas-derived fertilizers and petroleum-derived pesticides. Plastics, used in construction, medical technology, and every other aspect of life, are made from petroleum. City infrastructure such as roads and electric equipment all require petroleum products.

A shortage or drastic price increase at any point in the petroleum or natural gas chain would result in a severely impaired urban system. The complexity of a modern city such as San Francisco requires an uninterrupted supply of energy, as the electricity shortages of 2001 made clear. Over the last half-century, San Francisco has faced several petroleum interruptions owing to politics, war, or natural disaster. That we weathered the scarcity and looked to alternative sources is testament to San Francisco's resourcefulness. But each of these events was brief, after which petroleum and its products were again freely available. Today, however, the conditions are markedly different: owing to the geology of oil fields and past patterns of discovery and exploitation, the total global supply of petroleum will soon reach a peak and enter an inexorable decline—a well-understood geological phenomenon that the US experienced after 1970 and which is now affecting 60 countries worldwide. Petroleum is a finite resource, scarcity is inevitable, and technological fixes are inadequate at best.

As a 2005 U.S. Department of Energy-sponsored study indicated, we will face an absolute shortage of liquid fuels if appropriate measures are not taken years, if not decades, in advance of the global peak in oil production. These measures have not been forthcoming at a national level despite the recognition of the coming transition. It is thus incumbent on San Francisco to consider its own response, to protect its economic vitality, its citizens' wellbeing, and its historic role as a dynamic leader in progressive action. San Francisco's citizens are increasingly aware of the challenges we face, and a growing number of us have organized to consider what the city can do. We propose that the Commission support a resolution acknowledging peak oil as an initial step towards development of a response plan for San Francisco.

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