

San Francisco Oil Awareness

an outpost of the Post Carbon Institute

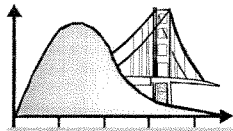
Request for Study Regarding the Issue of Peak Oil

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The issue of global oil depletion, commonly referred to as “peak oil”, is an extremely complex topic and an area in which many important factors remain uncertain. Due to the fundamental role that petroleum-based production and distribution play in our economies, however, even best case scenarios would necessitate action by all levels of government, while worst-case scenarios could entail wholesale breakdown of our economic system. In accordance with the precautionary principle, this high level of risk therefore calls for mitigation efforts to be initiated now.

While technical uncertainties regarding petroleum reserves and production capacity are beyond the power of city governments to address, much can be done to improve our knowledge of how various peak oil scenarios would affect the operation of a city like San Francisco. San Francisco Oil Awareness (SFOA) therefore proposes that the San Francisco Commission on the Environment request a comprehensive study regarding the possible effects of peak oil on our city and possible actions that the city government might take now in order to mitigate those effects. Such a study would include a thorough inventory of city activities and corollary resource requirements, evaluating specifically how various petroleum price scenarios would affect each area of activity and the scope for alternatives and other policy directions to offset these impacts. Areas of activity to be addressed would include the following:

- **Food production and distribution.** Where does the bulk of our food come from, and to what degree would those supply chains remain economical in the context of high petroleum prices? What if supply chains were disrupted in the short and/or long term? What alternatives exist for local sourcing, and how can the city encourage and increase these alternatives?
- **Transportation.** This is an area in which a lot of work has already been done, but it must be built upon. How would various price scenarios impact mobility within the city? How can that impact be decreased via strategies such as improved public transportation, zoning modifications, and improved land-use planning? What percentage of San Francisco’s residents relies on extra-municipal travel for crucial activities such as work? What incentives can the city use to decrease that percentage?
- **Residential energy.** Natural gas depletion and petroleum depletion are interrelated. Indeed, while we speculate about the timing and severity of peak oil, peak natural gas is already a marked problem in North America. How can the city respond to this? How can renewable and decentralized power options be encouraged at a high level? Are current city initiatives – such as the Electricity Resource Plan and the Climate Action Plan – sufficient? If not, how can such initiatives be made more ambitious and/or complemented with additional actions? How can the city ensure timely and thorough implementation of such initiatives?
- **Water.** Although San Francisco relies primarily on gravity for the delivery of its water, pumping and treating that water after it reaches the Bay Area still requires large amounts



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sustainable and secure? Is it possible for local catchment to be more directly utilized? How can water be used more efficiently, and how can the city support these changes?

- **Waste collection and disposal.** How can waste collection and disposal be kept operational, despite sharply increasing petroleum prices? If it becomes necessary to source more food products locally, how can the city encourage the recycling of nutrients in order to build up currently depleted soil? Is the Zero Waste Plan sufficient, and if not, how can it be made more ambitious?
- **Emergency services.** How can emergency services be kept operational indefinitely, despite sharply increasing petroleum prices and/or supply disruptions?
- **Economic activity.** How would San Francisco's economy fare under different scenarios of national and international trade reduction due to rising petroleum and transport costs? What impact would increasingly unaffordable air travel have on the tourism sector? How would various petroleum price scenarios affect prices and wages within the city? From an equity perspective, how would such wage and price adjustments affect the most vulnerable segments of the city's population? How can we relocalize our economy in order to decrease our vulnerability to national and global instabilities?

SFOA hopes that an inventory of these areas of activity would produce three categories of recommended action:

- **Preparedness** for short-term petroleum-related crisis situations, such as supply disruption and/or extremely sharp price shocks. Such recommendations would operate in tandem with the city's existing Emergency Operations Plan.
- **Structural changes** required for longer-term viability that can be planned now, in order to reduce the city's vulnerability to crisis situations and to ensure its long-term prosperity in the face of permanently elevated petroleum prices and reduced petroleum availability.
- **Education and outreach** coordinated and funded by the city government and implemented in cooperation with non-profit and citizens' groups, to ensure a fully informed, cooperative citizenry that is prepared to respond productively to the reality of long-term energy constraints.

This is no minor undertaking. The scale of the uncertainties and dangers involved, however, demands that an inquiry of comparable magnitude be immediately undertaken. We, the members of SFOA, are concerned citizens of San Francisco. We cannot sit idly by, and we hope that our city government is similarly disinclined to do so.