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Curbing our dependence on petroleum is a must



By Christopher Harrod August 2, 2013 12:00 am

The United States by far uses more petroleum than any other country. How much oil do we use in the United States? According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, roughly 19 million barrels of oil each year, which equates to roughly 22 percent of the world's oil consumption.

Petroleum is often called crude oil and is known as a fossil fuel. Why fossil fuel? Well, it takes millions of years for this stuff to be made. That's why it's also classified as a nonrenewable resource. It formed when ancient plants and animals got buried in sand and sediment eons ago. As the layers built up it created heat and extreme pressure, which changed this material into petroleum over time.

Beyond not having enough oil to sustain our way of life for another hundred years, there are other consequences of being dependent on petroleum.

The extraction of oil is a dirty process that can damage ecosystems, groundwater and streams. There have been huge disasters, such as the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which continues to affect the wildlife and water quality. Oil companies have also chopped thousands of trees in the Amazon rainforest and have polluted this once pristine water in order to supply the world's demand for petroleum. This destruction is happening all over the globe, including places like Nigeria, Colombia, Ecuador and some other African countries. The people of these countries suffer for the profits of American oil conglomerates.

Not only has oil extraction been messy, but also the burning of oil products such as gasoline has added huge amounts of carbon to our atmosphere. The burning of gasoline has accelerated global warming beyond what scientists have observed in the past, causing sea levels to rise and temperatures to change. On top of that, the oil used in cars leaks over time, and when it rains, the surface oil flows into our local watersheds polluting our waterways. The combustion of fossil fuels can also cause poor air quality and trigger acid rain. Acid rain can damage trees, animals, and streams.

The use of petroleum to create synthetic fertilizers played a main role in the Green Revolution during the 1940s. The Green Revolution was a technology overhaul on farming including new hybrid plants, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Now, farmers started to rely solely on these synthetic fertilizers, which deplete the soil of valuable organic matter and disrupts the natural soil ecosystem overtime. It also leeches through the soil at a rapid rate, causing groundwater contamination. Using plant- and animal-based fertilizers eliminates the need to use petroleum-based products, and it is a more environmental friendly way to supply plants with nutrients.

You've now got a brief understanding of why petroleum is causing environmental harm and why it won't sustain our population's needs in the long run. What can we do to become less dependent on petroleum-based products?

Our government can continue to enforce taxes for gross polluting industries. They can also promote the use of energy efficient cars, heating, and other energy sources that are not derived from petroleum. For example, rebates offered by energy companies and our government has allowed homeowners to be able to afford solar power in their homes. There are also incentives to replace old washers, dryers, refrigerators and other energy draining appliances. Hybrid and electric cars are also becoming quite popular, with just about every automobile company having a hybrid or electric option.

Reducing our demand for fossil fuels and products is a sensible thing to do. If we want to insure that future generations will be able to enjoy this beautiful planet, it behooves us all to use our resources wisely. Whether finding solutions at home or at the governmental level, each of us should do our part to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and petroleum based products as much as we are able. I encourage you to contact your local officials to push them for sound environmental policies and do what you can at home to help reduce our consumption of petroleum products.

Christopher Harrod is an environmentalist, horticulturalist, novice mycologist and freelancer. An SSU alum who promotes the stewardship of our environment, he has served as an intern and is now a volunteer with the Cotati Creek Critters (cotaticreekcritters.info). For more information, links, and to visit his blog, go to www.wildcjh.com.

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