

The Enealthy Crisis¹

Link Between America's Raging Health and Energy Crises

The Energy Crisis and the Health Crisis have several things in common – so common that one must pause and consider whether they are actually the same thing.

The Energy industry is in crisis in many ways. First, it has systematically blocked solar and energy efficiency, as well as electric vehicles for thirty years. As a result, the energy industry is the cause of virtually all Climate Change.² It is the cause of 2/3 of all radioactive waste and proliferation. It is the primary cause of Mercury contamination and resulting brain damage to large percentages of young Americans. It causes 2/3 of the U.S. child asthma epidemic. The energy industry is the main cause of the Iraq war. Finally, the energy industry is now facing Peak Oil and Peak Gas, with prices rising and becoming increasingly volatile. Having caused wand now pushing nuclear power in China and throughout the world (next year in Florida), and pushing new coal plants and renewed dependency on foreign imports through the Bush administration's construction of Liquefied Natural Gas terminals along U.S. coastlines – to burn overseas gas in U.S. power plants for the first time. In other words, the energy industry is not only historically the cause of such incredible threats to humanity, it is now responding to these crises by ramping up its level of destructiveness.



The health industry is also in crisis in many ways. First, 40 million Americans do not have any form of health insurance, meaning many Americans are suffering and dying of treatable conditions because the

¹ This article is based on a speech made to the Health Medicine Forum, called “Energy and Health” in Pleasant Hill, California, on January 27, 2006.

² The U.S. electricity industry was the largest single cause of climate change in the world until 2004, when China surpassed it – mostly as the result of the U.S. energy industries’ massive development there – now focused on nuclear power development.

government does not require that they be protected, leaving this up to the market as a matter of cold war principle. Second, services offered by the U.S. health industry are inadequate and profit-oriented at the expense of actual health. Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) have taken the treatment of insured persons away from doctors and nurses or other licensed practitioners and into the hands of corporate functionaries, denying treatment and coverage to pre-existing conditions in a Kafkaesque system in which people who are sick are not entitled to health coverage even if they pay for it. Even after decades of evidence that preventative medicine saves money, the health industry continues to deny coverage to preventative medicine services, and discriminates against holistic practitioners. The health industry is a drug-and-scalpel business, in which hospitals are marketing zones for drug advertising and perks, and patients are corralled like oxen to treatments that yield profits for unseen medical technology corporations. As a result, America has a lower life expectancy than some third world countries, and a high rate of litigation from injured people who have no built-in security blanket such as those enjoyed in virtually every industrialized country.

Every American wants the health system to change. Every American also wants the energy system to change. Yet the established market players in health and energy have politically resisted change for decades.

The electric utility and the hospital or drug company have more in common than you think.

First, there are the proven and uncontested health impacts caused by the power industry. Power plants are the primary cause of

- 2/3 of the pollution causing the children's asthma epidemic in America.
- Virtually all mercury contamination that has made the fish in the majority of America's rivers toxic, causing widespread neurological damage among children
- 2/3 of all radioactive materials, which are cancer-causing and litter the earth's surface and oceans
- 2/3 of all greenhouse gases behind the climate crisis, which has reintroduced Mosquito-borne diseases such as Malaria to areas where it was not before

In other words, power plants probably cause more disease than cigarettes and alcohol combined. It is just that those who cause it are not held responsible for the direct consequences of the combustion of oil and coal – secondhand smoke is not just about cigarettes – it is the *status quo* of the power industry – you might ban smoking in bars or cafes or even on the sidewalk, but the air you breathe in America’s cities and suburbs remains legally lethal.

America’s puritanical tradition of personal responsibility has focused massive public resources on personal health decisions such as smoking and drinking, but has largely ignored public health decisions in which industrial interests cause human diseases, such as coal plants, nuclear plants and fossil fuel burning technologies. The government might stop people from drinking alcohol, but if they are Americans they still eat fish from mercury-lined rivers, streams and lakes, and suffer the consequences without even knowing why. I should say “we” suffer the consequences, because the fact is most Americans don’t know that they have damaged brains or lungs, much less why. A warning to perfect people; even if you are vegetarian and organic you are not immune (though it helps) – that organic baby lettuce grown by the Colorado River has cancer-causing rocket fuel contamination from a military base.

Another comparison to the health care industry; it is not true that there are no economic alternatives to coal plants, gas plants, and nuclear plants. Solar power is too, if you remove all the subsidies for fossil fuel and nuclear power plants. You read about them in the newspaper every day, because solar and wind power are so popular with voters that every politician from Governor Schwarzenegger to George Bush regularly issue press statements on their support for solar energy. But nothing ever happens. Marginalized solar companies humbled by political opposition beg for scraps from the government. Electricity Politics is like Groundhog Day – an amnesiac daily repetition of solar rhetoric followed by more gas and coal plants – and now, believe it or not, new nuclear power plants now in the pipeline in some states. Wake up to a solar press release, go to sleep in a cloud of smoke.

Bush’s shit eating grid certainly symbolizes the energy industry – Enron, the Texas cowboys’ raid on our coffers in Sacramento. But the energy crisis is not just about President Bush’s mascot chant. This has been going on for over thirty years, when solar, wind and other technologies were advanced enough to compete with coal plants, but they were never allowed to compete

on the same playing field. Nuclear power plant developers have never been willing to build a single nuclear power plant without the federal government assuming all the risks. Direct petroleum subsidies and the U.S. imperial armies cheapen gasoline at the pump, but at the expense of the economy, our democracy and even the species, which is directly threatened.

Politicians like to kiss babies and cut ribbons on solar panel installations. The utilities arrange for their ratepayers to finance “education” campaigns that create the illusion that they are installing green power in great leaps. But they have systematically blocked solar, and continue to do it to this very day. The utility corporations make their money in the wires, and solar panels reduce the use of wires, as well as transmission, as well as power plants. It is this wire that corrupted the institution so that it mobilized its resources to block the American public from going solar decades ago (aka Jerry Brown and Jimmy Carter). Had the utilities, coal, auto and oil corporations failed to block solar, Climate Crisis probably would have been averted; imagine if this statement one day appears on the gravestone of European civilization. The utilities and oil companies have gotten really advanced at knowing how to convince the public they are for solar, but they never built them, and they more or less stopped anyone else from building them on any scale. Instead the utilities and their partners the power merchants invested in gas-fired generation, through a loophole in his Public Utilities Regulatory Policy Act of 1978. In California today, PG&E is 42% gas-fired power plants, followed by a black blend of nuclear, old power dams from before World War II, and a margin of 13% renewable that they market to the moon as if they were pure as driven snow. “*People Do.*” Meanwhile, Exxon Mobil is the most profitable company in the world, and a highly profitable oil industry is feverishly announcing its new green image to amnesiac consumers, most of whom assume the public utility is a government agency, not a publicly traded corporation. Even today, solar power is a fraction of one percent of the power supply of the US, and not much more for California.

Among the largest two causes of the climate crisis are, first, the electric industry, and second, the oil and automobile industries, whose fuel and fuel burning products are the second largest cause of climate change. Do you blame yourself for driving a car? Don’t – because you don’t have a choice because Exxon Mobil and General Motors have suppressed the development of alternative fuel vehicles for decades, most recently California’s Electric Vehicle regulations, which Governor Davis suspended towards the end of his term under intense industry pressure. After that, General Motors recalled

every EV1 (one of the most popular cars ever among drivers) that it was required to sell to California drivers, and crushed them. Then all the other Big Five automakers followed suit. Even a university requesting a sample electric vehicle for display to the public was denied one. Gone now is the Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) promised since the early nineties – by now it would have been over 10% of the cars sold in California. Then the state government quietly created a new category – the Partial Zero Emission vehicle. Partial Zero, imagine that. And now you have the hybrid gasoline car instead – efficient, but not in the same ballpark as an electric vehicle. That is the extent of your choice of cars in this country – for entirely political reasons, and yes, I would say, conspiracy.

It was a Democratic Governor (Davis) who lifted the ZEV rule, under intense industry pressure, in the last days of his administration. It was a Democratic Senator Feinstein who announced California's soon-to-be-disastrous electric industry deregulation law (AB1890, 1996) was a "national model."

Decades before that, in 1949 General Motors, Firestone, Standard Oil and Phillips oil executives were convicted in U.S. District Court of criminal conspiracy in this matter and fined \$5,000 each for anti-trust violations (contracts in restraint of trade, i.e. forcing subsidiaries to buy products from their owners: GM buses, Firestone tires, Standard and Phillips oil). Their joint venture, National City Lines, purchased streetcar systems. At the time, 90 percent of all trips were by rail, chiefly electric rail; only one in 10 Americans owned an automobile. There were 1,200 separate electric street and interurban railways, a thriving and profitable industry with 44,000 miles of track, 300,000 employees, 15 billion annual passengers, and \$1 billion in income. "Virtually every city and town in America of more than 2,500 people had its own electric rail system," wrote former U.S. Senate Counsel Bradford Snell, whose 1974 report gave national prominence to the General Motors/National City Lines conspiracy case.³ In their draft indictment, federal prosecutors declared that the rationale underlying GM's financing of National City was "adoption by defendant National of a program to eliminate electrically propelled conveyances...." The assistant U.S. attorney

³ Snell's earlier treatise on this matter, "American Ground Transport," may be found in Part 4A of Hearings in S. 1167, The Industrial Reorganization Act, before the Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly of the Committee of the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: 1974).

general declared that the "result" of GM's plans "has been the elimination of electrically propelled vehicles and the substitution of motor buses in a number of cities." E.J. Quinby, president of the Electric Railroader's Association persuaded the government to bring the lawsuit against GM and its powerful automotive allies, writing to the U.S. attorney general that GM had combined with Standard Oil of California (Chevron), Phillips Petroleum, and Firestone, to form National City as part of "an organized campaign to deprive the American public of their splendid electric railway systems..." Members of GM's special unit went to, among others, the Southern Pacific, owner of Los Angeles' Pacific Electric, the world's largest interurban, with 1,500 miles of track, reaching 75 miles from San Bernardino, north to San Fernando, and south to Santa Ana; the New York Central, owner of the New York State Railways, 600 miles of street railways and interurban lines in upstate New York; and the New Haven, owner of 1,500 miles of trolley lines in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Threatening to divert lucrative automobile freight to rival carriers, they persuaded the railroad to convert its electric street cars to motor buses -- slow, cramped, foul-smelling vehicles whose inferior performance invariably led riders to purchase automobiles. As the largest depositor in the nation's leading banks, GM also enjoyed financial leverage over the electric railways, which relied heavily on these banks to supply their capital needs. According to U.S. Department of Justice documents, officials of GM visited banks used by railways in Philadelphia, Dallas, Kansas City and other locations, and, by offering them millions in additional deposits, persuaded their rail clients to convert to motor vehicles. Where these measures were unavailing, GM formed holding companies to buy up and motorize the railways directly. Thus, it helped organize and finance United Cities Motor Transit as a wholly owned GM subsidiary, as well as Greyhound, Rex Finance, Omnibus Corporation, National City Lines, Pacific City Lines, American City Lines, City Coach Lines, Manning Transportation and numerous other concerns, which acquired rail systems across the country, including those in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, Sacramento, San Diego and Oakland.

So the energy story is as old as the health care story, if not older. Perhaps it is industrialization itself that we are talking about – industrialization of health, industrialization of mobility, of light and heat – centralization, otherwise known as FORDISM.

You have a similar centralization in education that the charter school and home school movements are seeking to change. Industrialization of food indeed – the organic food movement now growing fast as an industry, but the mainstream purveyors of food like Safeway and Albertsons do not change. Not only do the distributors and retailers of America's food supply refuse to label genetically engineered foods, pesticides, or petroleum products, but agribusiness is aggressively assaulting farmers who do not wish to use their new GMO viruses and genes. Percy Schmeiser is a farmer from Saskatchewan Canada, whose Canola fields were contaminated with Monsanto's genetically engineered Round-Up Ready Canola by pollen from a nearby farm. Monsanto says it doesn't matter how the contamination took place, and is therefore demanding Schmeiser pay their Technology Fee (the fee farmers must pay to grow Monsanto's genetically engineered products). According to Schmeiser, "I never had anything to do with Monsanto, outside of buying chemicals. I never signed a contract. If I would go to St. Louis (Monsanto Headquarters) and contaminate their plots--destroy what they have worked on for 40 years--I think I would be put in jail and the key thrown away." As in holistic medicine and alternative energy, there is a massive practitioner's movement of organic farms and even a few retail chains, but they are also stuck within the five percentile of market ghetto in which chiropractors and solar installers find themselves – and the inertial drift of cold war capital falls forward like some apocalyptic war horse. Just as some HMOs now make gestures toward holistic medicine in their billboard and television advertisements (a new version of "we care"), the primary product remains what it ever was – an industrial product that makes money in a specific way, will not voluntarily change its own structure, and will do everything to block, marginalize or co-opt any new competitors.

Transportation has its litany of horror stories. Most recently, an utterly brilliant, revolutionary and affordable new transportation technology called the Segway "Human Transporter" was marginalized by an inexplicable rash of opposition among handicapped activists. Designed by a team of geniuses in Vermont led by Dean Kamen, the Segway causes 1/18th the pollution of a new Volkswagen Bug, stands up on two wheels and controls vehicle balance using three gyroscopic flywheels and a computer. Fuel costs per mile compared to a car is about 1/50. These vehicles are available and for sale in the U.S. at about \$5000. From a technological and economic point of view, this is among the most important inventions ever. But something happened. Immediately after being offered for sale, ordinances were introduced in over a dozen cities banning them from sidewalks. In San Francisco, violent

hearings in San Francisco City Hall included a scene in which Segway's head engineer, a nearly retired electric flywheel genius, was spat upon. The municipal bans on Segways continued throughout the United States, and investment in Segway waned so the company can no longer grow.

- Another comparable aspect of health and energy is the fact that alternatives not only exist, but are thriving, significant historical movements – some of the leaders being here today.

The nation's health crisis debate often breaks down into two categories:

- HMO Costs are out of control and 40 Million Americans have no health coverage; AND
- Those American lucky enough to afford health care face a system that overdepends on drugs and surgery, and generally marginalizes preventative practitioners.

This has many repercussions. Americans lack personal security because the HMO industry and Hospital system cannot change. As with solar power, organic food, and electric vehicles, the institutional giants appear unable or unwilling to change, and it has been too long to wait.

In my book I discuss how the structural changes that are needed may be achieved, starting with my own success in energy (the largest industrial sector, with the greatest concentration of capital and the greatest ecological impacts of any human activity), and attempt to solve the health care crisis in a comparable way.

Please visit my organization's website and get some literature on the revolutionary efforts going on in San Francisco.

Please Contact Paul Fenn at paulfenn@local.org or 510 451 1727

Energy Stories and Public Speeches by Paul Fenn, 2001-06

- "Doing a 360 in San Francisco," to be published in *Architecture Magazine*, May 2006;
- 2006 Speaker, Health Medicine Forum, Teleosis, "Healthy Planet Healthy People," Pleasant Hill;
- "360: San Francisco's \$ Billion Solar Public Works Project," *Architecture California* - Journal of The American Institute of Architects, Issue 5.4, January 2006;
- 2005 Guest Speaker, League of Women Voters, "Keeping the Lights On," California Public Utilities Commission, San Francisco;
- 2005 Speaker, Ecology Center, "Future of Energy - With Loretta Lynch," Berkeley
- "The Day After Tomorrow: California Climate Crisis Looms With Maneuvers to Make Golden State Power Grid Dependent on Imported Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG)," *Local Power News*, May, 2004;
- 2005 Speaker, California Attorney General's Office, Project California, Oakland
- 2005 Guest Speaker, Environmental Forum of Marin, "Fossil Fuels and Climate Change," Novato
- 2004 Featured Guest Speaker "Boiling Point: An Evening With Ross Gelbspan," Mill Valley
- 2004 Panelist, Law Seminars International, "New Direction for CA Energy Markets," San Francisco
- 2004 Panelist, U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, "Bay Area Town Hall Meeting," San Francisco
- "California Hybrids Sell Out Emission Free Vehicles," *The Free Press*, Aug. 29, 2003;
- 2002 Speaker, British Embassy and Commonwealth Office, U.S. Consultative Meeting, Washington DC