

At Witz End:

The Day the Gas Ran Out

It's not as far away as you think!

Report by Gary Witzenburg

Ever since prehistoric man was blessed with the discovery of fire, he has evolved more and more into a creature totally dependent on fuel in 1 form or another—and he has spent increasing amounts of his time and energy searching for it.

Over a long period of time, supplies will diminish and become more difficult and expensive to locate and process, prices will climb out of sight with increased demand and declining supply, and energy itself will become a luxury for the rich instead of a cheap universally available commodity.

When will this begin? That depends on a lot of factors, like how quickly will we be able to develop and safely utilize the vast supplies of nuclear power, how soon will our research programs pay off in terms of new sources of power and more efficient uses of what we have, and how long will the rest of the world allow

us to deplete their own vital fuel supplies.

These are questions which may or may not be answered in our lifetimes, but the effects of the crisis are already being felt.

But why did this crisis appear so suddenly? Why didn't someone see it coming and act in time to head it off? Why did the government continue to bury the auto-makers under piles of emissions and safety regulations, many of them of questionable value at best, and all of them contributing toward plummeting gas mileage? Why didn't the petroleum industry speak up before?

The blame must be shared by all of us, although there is widespread suspicion that the oil companies allowed it to happen to prove their case. Their point, however, is a very good one, and it's too bad that public skepticism forces them to smash us in the face to get our attention—if that is in fact what they did. The point: Primarily due to en-

vironmentalists, it has become virtually impossible to construct new petroleum refining

facilities in this country. And existing plants simply cannot meet today's demand for refined petroleum products, which continues to increase unabated.

Don't get me wrong, I'm in favor of clean air and water as much as the next person, perhaps more so, but it's about time to begin to weigh environmental considerations against energy needs.

The government has finally begun to take action to relieve the immediate crisis by lifting the obsolete import quotas on oil, moving to lease more offshore drilling rights to oil companies and taking steps to encourage further domestic exploration. Thus the supply of crude oil should increase, but not the facilities to process it. President Nixon has also proposed legislation which would tend to relieve the demand for refined oil products by encouraging environmentally responsible strip mining for coal, streamlining the licensing procedures for nuclear power plants, and making exploration for new sources of natural gas more economically feasible.

If the government agencies must legislate to exist, then let them legislate mileage—so long as it's done with reason and restraint. Let them also take steps to get those new refineries built 1 way or another, a task which is estimated to require 4 years and \$250 million for each

160,000 barrel per day facility. (We will need something like 5 such refineries per year for the next 10 years to meet our own demand for refined products such as gasoline, diesel fuel and heating oil.)

In the meantime it is up to us, the motoring public, to take an immediate interest in the amount of fuel we consume. New car buyers should shop for mileage and cars equipped with overdrive, not just horsepower and air-conditioning. If we want it, they'll produce it.

We must also do the things the President has already recommended in order to conserve gasoline: Form car pools, or at least share rides whenever possible and cut out unnecessary and needlessly wasteful driving. Also try to keep your car in tune and go a little slower as a general rule. Even today's large V8 engines can get as much as 14-15mpg when driven prudently with 65-70mph cruising speeds, but play leadfoot and cruise at 85-90 and your mileage can drop to 9mpg or below.

If increasing cost doesn't impress you enough to follow these minimum practices, then the threat of non-availability or heavy-handed legislation should. Gasoline rationing, a tax on horsepower, and a nationwide 50mph speed limit to conserve fuel are some of the solutions being seriously proposed right now. Will we relieve the situation ourselves or let Big Brother take over for us again? The choice is ours.