

The Oil addiction

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By Alan Betts

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(VPR HOST) As millions of gallons of crude oil leak into the Gulf of Mexico, commentator Alan Betts saying it's time to think about reducing our need for oil.

(BETTS) When the Deepwater Horizon oil-rig blew up and then sank on Earth day, it was another sign that the days of cheap oil are over. The oil is spreading in the Gulf of Mexico, and the destruction of marine life and loss of livelihood for those living along the coast is just beginning.

Yes, drilling regulations were weak to save money, and encourage more drilling. We accepted without question the 2009 environmental impact analysis for this oil-rig that claimed this type of accident was impossible; even though blowout preventers have failed on many occasions in the past. As with nuclear power, catastrophic accidents are always 'impossible' until they happen. We must recognize that drilling in deep water into pressurized rock reservoirs at great depths is inherently risky. The costs of accidents are extremely high and the environmental damage can last for decades.

It is time to look once again at our oil addiction that drives us to take these risks. It takes so much oil to keep our society running because we use oil so inefficiently. Our rural state is dependent on oil for transportation and public transport is very limited. The fuel efficiency of the cars and trucks in Vermont could be doubled or tripled, but change comes very slowly. Are we ready to lose all our coastal zones and marine life just to feed our SUVs?

I drive a Prius that gets 50 mpg, but for most of my short trips into Rutland, something that weighed half as much and got double that mileage is all I really need – but it isn't being built!

What else can we do? Most of Vermont's houses are heated by oil. Our house is 160 years old. I put in a wood stove in the living room, insulated the attic and replaced the old windows, but the stone basement was drafty and home at times to mice and red squirrels. For years I have just looked at it and sighed. But just last month, I finally got an energy audit – by chance it was the day after the Deepwater Horizon sank in the Gulf. The difficulties that I saw were just interesting challenges to the young enthusiastic technician. So last week they came and sealed our basement with a hard insulating foam sprayed directly onto the rock foundation, and put high quality weather-stripping on the doors. Pressure testing with a blower door showed that the infiltration of air into the house had been reduced about 22%.

It is one small but very satisfying step for us. I expect we will burn a few hundred less gallons of oil next winter and our house will be less drafty. It is too late for the Deepwater Horizon disaster, but it is not too late to retrofit our old houses one by one. The post-oil transition is fast approaching.