

## **Let's be honest about our global interdependence**

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Climate change is only one of the many global challenges facing us in the coming decades. Most of these challenges are interconnected — meaning that we cannot deal with them separately. But first we must be honest and recognize our global interdependence.

Global food prices are the highest in more than 20 years, and this is terrible news for the poor around the world. A major factor is climate change, which brought more extreme weather around the globe in 2010 and reduced crops. Rising food prices have been one small factor, along with political oppression, in the unrest in Africa and the Middle East.

U.S. corn reserves are expected to hit a minimum this year, but for a different reason — we are diverting so much corn to make ethanol to mix with gasoline to fuel our cars. And as the price of oil goes up, we divert more food production to biofuels. The price of oil is rising for several reasons. Global demand is up again after the global recession. China now sells more cars every year than the United States does. But global oil production is flat, and the debate is on as to when we will reach “peak oil.” A report by the U.S. military suggests a peak in 2012 and real global shortages of oil by 2015. Meanwhile conflict in Libya reduces the flow of oil.

Economic philosophy maintains that prices will rise until our demand is met. But can we really meet the global demand for oil? We are taking ever greater risks in our pursuit of oil: drilling for it in deeper water and extracting oil from shale at great environmental cost — as well as converting food to fuel. The claim has been made for years that Saudi Arabia has huge oil reserves and can ramp up production. Recent WikiLeaks documents suggest that Saudi Arabia may have overestimated its reserves by 40 percent. Few believe we can cope with rising global demand for liquid fuels this decade.

WikiLeaks has introduced a new openness into our global discussion. For years our fearful leaders have tried to hide the truth about many problems. Now this edifice of secrecy is crumbling. And it is about time: To deal with our global problems we must be honest about them. Now the Internet is making it harder for our leaders to hang on to power through deceit. The resurgence of democratic yearnings across Africa and the Arab world is another call for greater openness in society. Yet the political response of the United States, as world resources slip from its grasp, has been to spend more on the military and incur huge deficits by cutting taxes!

Our global society has become more interdependent and at the same time more vulnerable, because we keep discounting the mounting risks we face. The catastrophe in Japan is a tragic example. Situated on the Pacific Rim, Japan faces frequent large earthquakes. Some generate powerful tsunamis, which lead to immense loss of life. Despite this, the Fukushima complex of six reactors was built on the coast, and it was not designed to survive a major earthquake and tsunami. Nuclear reactors and fuel-rod storage ponds are not fail-safe. If they are damaged and their cooling systems lose power, fuel rods overheat, melt and release radiation.

Here in Vermont we must plan with greater urgency for a much more energy-efficient society to make the transition away from oil and nuclear power to renewable energy sources. We don't even know what that mix will be, so we need vision, experimentation and flexibility. The past is not our future: we must create the future, which means a lot of collaboration and inspired work.