

PEAK TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORTATION TRIAGE

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Whether you focus on Peak Energy, Climate Chaos or what is euphemistically called the “Great Recession,” each of these aspects of reaching the limits to growth mandate an end to highway expansion. We cannot afford to build more roads when we cannot maintain what we already have. The transition from cheap, abundant oil to expensive, hard to get oil is reducing the amount that people drive and damaging the economic system that requires endless growth to function. Peak Energy is starting to reduce the physical ability to grow traffic levels, regardless of economic circumstances. Burning fossil fuels pollutes the thin film of the atmosphere, with health consequences and environmental impacts, including global warming. Ecology, energy and money are interconnected and inseparable, and each require a holistic integration with the others to address any of them.

Energy depletion is not merely about personal transportation. Driving less will be uncomfortable, but eating less would be far more difficult. Most food eaten in the US crosses time zones, some travels across international borders. As fossil fuels decline we need to grow food where it is eaten. Relocalizing food production, growing food in cities, community gardens, suburban “food not lawn” efforts, and protection of farmland from asphalt and concrete are all needed to cope with oil depletion.

George H.W. Bush's highway law - the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) - requires Federal aid highway plans to be designed for traffic conditions two decades in the future, not current traffic congestion. It's anyone's guess what energy (and therefore, traffic) levels will be in the 2030s, but under any physically possible scenario the flow rates of petroleum and other fuels will be considerably less than they are today, since conventional fossil fuels have peaked globally. There will be oil extraction in the 2030s but at levels less than current rates. Future fuels will be the dirtier, more expensive, difficult to extract “bottom of the barrel” supplies. Hyper efficient cars, public transit, car sharing, and relocalization could mitigate these impacts but not prevent them.

Transportation planning needs to focus on maintaining the enormous road networks already built, not expanding them further for travel demand that will not materialize on the energy downslope. The investments euphemistically called “modernization” should be dedicated toward quality train service, not super wide superhighways.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) mandates a “Supplemental” Environmental Impact Statement must be prepared if there are “new circumstances” not anticipated when the scoping process was conducted. Surely reaching the global peak of petroleum production is relevant for a transportation project allegedly designed for travel long past the peak.

If the Federal Highway Administration included Peak Energy in environmental analyses, this would be a seismic shift in transportation planning across the United States. Realistic plans need to consider energy depletion and the limits to growth on a finite planet. There are several ways this shift could happen: a successful Federal lawsuit forces FHWA to include Peak Energy, the start of gasoline rationing makes transportation planners consider alternatives, or a change in national policies.

Peak Energy and Peak Vehicle Miles Traveled are “new circumstances” relevant for proposed transportation projects.

Council on Environmental Quality regulations

40 CFR 1502.9:

Draft, final and supplemental statements.

(c) Agencies:

- (1) Shall prepare supplements to either draft or final environmental impact statements if:
 - (i) The agency makes substantial changes in the proposed action that are relevant to environmental concerns; or
 - (ii) **There are significant new circumstances or information** relevant to environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed action or its impacts.

Federal Highway Administration regulations

23 CFR 771.130:

Supplemental environmental impact statements.

(a) A draft EIS, final EIS, or supplemental EIS may be supplemented at any time. An EIS shall be supplemented whenever the Administration determines that:

- (1) Changes to the proposed action would result in significant environmental impacts that were not evaluated in the EIS; or
- (2) **New information or circumstances relevant to environmental concerns and bearings on the proposed action or its impacts would result in significant environmental impacts not evaluated in the EIS.**

“These forty million [poor] people are invisible because America is so affluent, so rich; because our expressways carry us away from the ghetto, we don't see the poor.”

— Martin Luther King, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution"

March 31, 1968 (five days before his assassination)