

Op-Ed Oil isn't cheap -- at any price

By **RHEA SUH**

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s world oil prices have slumped below \$60 a barrel, tumbling nearly 50% since June to a five-year low, analysts have scrambled to discern the economic and political fallout.

The big picture, though, hasn't changed: Oil is not cheap, at any price. What we're charged at the pump for gasoline is just a down payment on the far larger tab we're running to support our national oil habit. Rather than allow a temporary price reprieve to mask those costs, we should use this moment to take stock and change course.

Every day in this country, we use 800 million gallons of oil. That's enough to fill the Empire State Building three times. With every gallon we produce, ship and burn, we incur costs that are piling up — for ourselves and our children.

The greatest burden we're imposing on the next generation comes from the environmental damage we're doing by consuming this fuel.

Burning oil and other fossil fuels is what generates the dangerous carbon pollution that is driving climate change, the central environmental challenge of our time. The first 11 months of this year were the hottest, globally, of any year since worldwide measurements began in 1880. We have an obligation to protect future generations from the dangers of more extreme heat, fires, drought and storms. Our national oil habit is making matters worse.

At the other end of the process, producing oil comes at a high cost to the natural systems we all depend on for our prosperity, our progress and our very survival.

Fracking — the source of a large and growing share of our domestic oil — has brought the perils of the industrial oil patch to the American backyard. It threatens the water, air, ranches and farms in communities across more than 30 states where this destructive industrial practice is used to drill for oil and natural gas.

Offshore oil production puts workers, waters and wildlife at risk of the kind of disaster that followed the 2010 BP blowout. That disaster killed 11 Americans, dumped 170 million gallons of toxic crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico and threw thousands of people out of work in the fishing, hospitality and energy industries.

Tar sands development is gutting vast tracts of one of the last truly wild places on Earth, the North American boreal forest of Canada, and poisoning waterways local people have relied on for their food and livelihoods for generations.

And Arctic drilling threatens rich habitat where the industry lacks the skills, equipment or knowledge to prevent, contain or clean up a spill.

Shipping crude oil exposes communities large and small to the kind of pipeline blowouts we've seen contaminate waters and lands in Michigan, Arkansas and elsewhere, part of the nearly 5,900 pipeline failures that have killed more than 375 Americans and spilled nearly 100 million gallons of oil and other hazardous liquids over just the last two decades. It also puts towns, cities and rural areas at risk of the kinds of oil train explosions we've suffered from the plains of North Dakota to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

Securing access to oil reserves and shipping lanes worldwide, for ourselves and our allies, imposes huge costs, in terms of treasure and lives, on members of the U.S. military, their families and the taxpayers. The same goes for the U.S. diplomatic corps, which expends enormous resources each year shoring up relationships linked to the global oil trade. To the extent we must borrow money to finance these military and diplomatic operations, we're passing on the costs of today's oil to our children. Uncertainty, too, imposes costs. And, here, our dependence on oil is exacting a steep toll.

Oil prices go up, down and up again, depending on global forces. What it means is that our families, our workers, our entire economy is held hostage to global price swings we can neither control nor predict.

That's why eight presidents — going back to Richard Nixon — have called on Americans, as a nation, to break this costly addiction to oil.

That means investing in efficiency so we can do more with less waste. It means getting more power from the wind and sun. It means building, in this country, the best electric and hybrid cars in the world. And it means remembering that cutting demand and diversifying supply remain the two most powerful tools for dealing with global oil markets we can't control or predict. That's the way to help ensure that all Americans have greater access to affordable energy, not just for today or next week, but far into the future.

Rhea Suh, a former assistant secretary of the Interior, is the incoming president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group.

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