

Peak oil and public health: Political common ground?

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Peak petroleum—the point at which the maximum rate of global oil extraction is reached, after which the rate of production begins to decline—is a hot topic in scientific and energy circles. When will it occur? What will the impact be? While geologists and economists debate the specifics, American University School of Communication professor Matthew Nisbet believes peak petroleum and the associated risks to public health may provide an opportunity to bring conservatives and liberals together in the move toward alternative forms of energy.

"Somewhat surprisingly, conservatives are more likely to associate a major spike in oil prices with a strong threat to [public health](#)," said Nisbet—an expert in the field of climate and energy communication. "This could present a gateway to engagement with conservatives on energy policy."

In a forthcoming peer-reviewed study at the *American Journal of Public Health*, Nisbet and his co-authors find that 76% of people in a recent survey believe oil prices are either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to triple in the next five years. A dramatic spike in oil prices is a commonly recognized outcome of peak petroleum.

Even more telling is that 69% of respondents believe a sharp rise in oil prices would be either "very harmful" (44%) or "somewhat harmful" (25%) to the health of Americans. According to the survey, strong conservatives were the most sensitive to these possible risks, with 53% believing that a spike in oil prices would be "very harmful" to human

health. Similarly, in a separate analysis of the data, those who were strongly "dismissive" of climate change (52%) were the most likely of any subgroup to associate a sharp spike in oil prices with a negative impact on public health.

According to Nisbet and his co-authors, this creates a challenge and an opportunity for the environmental and public health communities. Peak [oil](#) and energy prices are often talked about in terms of economic and environmental impact, but rarely as a public health concern. Nisbet argues that his findings show reason to reframe the debate.

"These findings suggest that a broad cross-section of Americans may be ready to engage in dialogue about ways to manage the health risks that experts associate with peak petroleum," said Nisbet. "Peak petroleum may not currently be a part of the public health portfolio, but we need to start the planning process."

Provided by American University

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