



Fossil Fuels Used

Fossil Fuels in Our Lives

Our modern way of life is intimately dependent upon fossil fuels. There are very few aspects of our daily life that are not, in some way, touched by our usage of them. Just examine what is required to read this activity on your computer screen. If you are in the U.S. and plugged into the local electrical system, the majority of the electricity powering the computer came from the burning of coal. The plastic in the keyboard and computer came from crude oil or natural gas feedstock. The smelters that were used to create the wires in the computer and in the electric and phone lines used some sort of coal or petroleum fuel source.

Could all of this usage of fossil fuels be replaced? That is a very important question. The consumption of fossil fuels to provide energy could be replaced by other fuels such as wind, nuclear, and hydroelectric, although it is not going to happen overnight. However, there are many other uses of fossil fuels where replacements are not going to be easy, as the list of viable alternatives is quite short and expensive. How do you replace the use of natural gas for making artificial fertilizers? You could go back to the process of using manure, but it would come at a very heavy price and might result in reduced food crops, which could seriously impact a world population that is still growing. How do you replace the use of crude oil for plastic? There is some work on using plant materials to create biodegradable plastics, but it is still years off. And what of the use of oil as a lubricant or wax? The product that we used to use for this (whale oil) is in very short supply.

Our nation currently consumes approximately 20 million barrels of oil, 60 billion cubic feet of natural gas, and 3 million short tons of coal every day¹. These rates have been growing, and are projected to continue to grow over the coming years. As fossil fuel stocks become depleted, it will have a serious impact on our lives. Shortages will lead to higher prices for the products that use them, which given the ubiquitous nature of their usage, means that inflation will take off like a rocket. This will lead to unstable economic and political situations. If history has any say in this matter, this will mean going to war. Some would say that the most recent war that the U.S. is fighting in Iraq is just the first in a line of wars that will be fought over fossil fuels.

In this capstone activity, we are going to try to look at our individual fossil fuel usage. It would be nice if we could actually calculate how much each one of us is responsible for using. However, a great deal of our personal fossil fuel usage is hidden from us and almost impossible to calculate. For instance, the food that we eat was produced using oil in the fertilizer spread on the crops, fuel in the tractors that plowed the field, and diesel in the trucks that brought the food to market, amongst other things. The newspaper you read in the morning required fossil fuels to create the paper, run the presses, and deliver the paper. Every product that you use during your day has a similar story.

Rather than try to calculate the total amount of fossil fuels that you use, we are going to only look at some rather direct usage that we can track very easily. For the purposes of this activity, we are going to investigate how much fossil fuel we use to transport ourselves and to power our homes. The average person in the U.S. uses about 14 barrels of oil, .9 tons of coal, and 21 tcf of natural gas. This usage is just a fraction of the total amount of usage for which we are responsible. All of our usage from industrial and commercial processes combined amounts to over 8.2 barrels of oil, .7 tons of coal, and 53 tcf of natural gas per person in the U.S. per year². Even these numbers do not account for transporting products to market or to your home.

Activity

To aid us in our estimation, we will use an online calculator that will convert the measurable items that we use into amounts of fossil fuel that have been consumed. This calculator is able to do this based upon some [assumptions](http://myweb.astate.edu/jpratte/phsc1014/assumptions.htm) (<http://myweb.astate.edu/jpratte/phsc1014/assumptions.htm>) about the mix of fuel in this country. To use the calculator, you will need to find out or estimate the following quantities about your lifestyle:

- The average number of miles that you drive each year, and the mileage of your car(s).
- The number of miles that you drive/fly each year on airlines, buses, trains, taxis, and motorcycles.
- The amount of electricity that you use in your home each year.
- The amount of natural gas, propane, kerosene, or heating oil that you use in your home each year.
- The amount of gasoline that you use in your lawnmower/weed eater each year.

There are several ways to get good estimates for our usage. For driving, we can document our driving for a week and using our average usage over this time, calculate a yearly average by multiplying by 52 (if you use your car to travel on long vacations, you might want to estimate how far these would be and add them to the total). For electricity and natural gas usage, we can consult the bills that we get from the electric and natural gas providers, which should have an average usage. If you do not get a bill, then you can still get a reasonable estimate for electricity by going back to the second lab, which had your usage for small appliances each day, and adding to it an estimate for the large appliances (hot water heater, heater/air conditioner, etc.). These additional estimates can be made by finding out the power of the devices and estimating that they are on about 1/3 of the day (unless you're a.c. does run constantly).

Once you have your estimates, plugging these numbers into the [calculator](http://myweb.astate.edu/jpratte/phsc1014/fossilcalculator.htm) (<http://myweb.astate.edu/jpratte/phsc1014/fossilcalculator.htm>) will allow you to estimate how much of each fossil fuel you are responsible for consuming each year. After doing this, answer the questions on the activity sheet below.

References

- 1 <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb0103.html>
- 2 <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/consump.html>

