

# Peak fossil fuels - jump now or be pushed later

The only thing voluntary about cutting our emissions is when we do it. If we delay acting, not even the pace at which the cuts are made will be under our control. This is because emissions are going to fall within the next 20 years anyway as the world's reserves of oil, gas and even coal run down. It's better to cut emissions now, because if we leave it until the fall is brought about by a decline in fossil fuel output, we will have wrecked the world's climate and run out of energy to decarbonise the economy through our delay.

World oil production is probably as high now as it will ever go and output may well begin to decline within the next two or three years. World gas supplies are also nearing their peak. Here's Chris Skrebowski, the editor of the Petroleum Review: "My guess is that oil output will decline at 3% a year. With gas ... the global rate of decline could be 2 or 3%, starting 10 years after oil."

The timing and rate of decline of coal output is less clear. For years, the consensus was that there was abundant coal but in April 2007, Werner Zittel and Jorg Schindler released a report Coal: Resources and Future Production which concluded that the world's coal reserves had been over-estimated and that global coal production was likely to peak around 2025 at 30% above present production levels. It would then decline and from 2060 onwards, the fall would be about 2% a year. However, as with oil and gas, the amount of energy the coal would be able to provide would decline even faster than the actual output because of the increased effort required by the mining process.

Most politicians and climate campaigners have been reluctant to accept the idea that the world's oil and gas supplies will peak soon. However, the energy crisis and its climate counterpart both indicate that humanity has to cap its fossil fuel use immediately and then reduce its consumption by at least 3% a year. This is the minimum initial level at which the annual caps have to fall. Fossil fuel depletion adds a powerful argument to the climate campaigners' cause.