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THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSUMPTION

by Jaesa McLin*

An alarming, and at the same time, reassuring realization is making its way to the forefront of the minds of energy onlookers. The United States has one of the world's largest oil reserves:¹ trapped deep within the rocks of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, as well as Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana, is an oil shale with deposits estimated at more than five times the size of Saudi Arabia.² However, this oil is not readily available. If nature were to take its course, the oil could not be extracted for millions of years.

Royal Shell Oil Company ("Shell") has created a way to speed up the process, allowing for extraction in three to four years.³ The method is called In-Situ Conversion Process ("ICP"). The process begins with drilling holes into the earth's crust and then dropping huge heating coils into the ground.⁴ By heating up the earth's surface, kerogen, a solid organic substance, transforms into oil and gas.⁵ Shell's pilot project has produced over 1,200 barrels of oil on government-owned land containing oil shale deposits.⁶ Currently, Shell is perfecting the ICP and moving toward a large-scale commercial project that could produce up to one trillion barrels of oil on U.S. soil.⁷ While Shell is spending millions of dollars to perfect its system, it is also lobbying the United States Congress for the right to lease more land where the oil shale is located. The U.S. government took ownership of the land in 1910 with the passage of the Pickett Act and set aside the land as the nation's first strategic reserve.⁸

The oil shale could potentially solve many of the energy problems that the United States has faced since the oil embargo in the 1970s. With access to this reserve, the United States will greatly diminish its oil imports. However, what does this mean for the environment? Shell maintains that the environmental impact of oil shale exploration is actually less than the impact in

regular oil exploration.⁹ More worrisome is the effect on the atmosphere if that much more fossil fuel is burned. Can the earth sustain itself if a trillion more barrels of oil are burned in the next generations than would have been naturally available?

In the United States, national security concerns seem to outweigh many other considerations these days, and so the exploration and exploitation of this reserve may be viewed by some as the best option to lessen the dependency of the United States on foreign energy

sources. Governmental and commercial players posit that they have the utmost consideration for the environment and sustainable development. However, at this critical moment it is exceedingly important for nongovernmental organizations and environmental groups to weigh in with their expertise. Furthermore, the benefits of renewable energy sources and other new technology must be considered.



Can the earth sustain itself if a trillion more barrels of oil are burned in the next generations than would have been naturally available?

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Endnotes:

¹ HARRY R. JOHNSON ET AL., STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF AMERICA'S OIL SHALE RESOURCE (2004), available at http://www.oildrop.org/Info/Lib/Shale/npr_strategic_sigv2.pdf (last visited Feb. 23, 2007).

² Dan Denning, *Oil Shale Reserves: Stinky Water, Sweet Oil*, DAILY RECKONING, available at <http://www.dailyreckoning.com/rpt/OilShale.html> (last visited Feb. 23, 2007).

³ *Oil Shale and Oil Sands Resources: Hearing Before the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee* (2005) (testimony of Stephen Mut, CEO, Shell), available at http://energy.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Testimony&Hearing_ID=1445&Witness_ID=4139 (last visited Mar. 9, 2007) [hereinafter Mut].

⁴ Mut, *id.*

⁵ Mut, *id.*

⁶ Mut, *id.*

⁷ Mut, *supra* note 3.

⁸ Denning, *supra* note 2.

⁹ Mut, *supra* note 3.