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## CNY can lead development of the 'hydrogen economy'

March 30, 2003

By Cornelius B. Murphy Jr.

Motorists feel a twinge of pain these days when they pull up to a gas pump and realize that 10 gallons of gas are going to cost them close to \$20. But the investment in that tank of gas is much greater than the cash that gets pulled out of a driver's pocket.

Consider the seven aircraft carriers, 300,000 service men and women and more than 1,000 aircraft that have been sent to the Middle East. Their presence is linked to the supply of crude oil that helps fill our nation's need for petroleum. But regardless of international relations and military action, economists and experts in the field of energy supplies agree on one thing:

The world's shrinking reserves of petroleum cannot last the century. Our children's children and grandchildren will face a very different world. As the globe's population expands, demand for energy goes up with it. Demand will grow faster as developing nations evolve into more modern, consumer economies.

The answer to this dilemma is to shift our focus to hydrogen as an energy source. It is the next in a long line of materials - from wood and animal fat to petroleum and natural gas - that have been used from the beginning of human history to provide energy.

President Bush has made a commitment to a new "hydrogen economy," which has roots in Central New York. Switching our dependence from petroleum to hydrogen would provide a number of social, economic, and environmental benefits.

Powering our vehicles with hydrogen, rather than petroleum-based fuels, will greatly reduce and perhaps eliminate carbon dioxide emissions, thus easing the threat of CO2-induced climate change. Environmentally disastrous oil spills would eventually be eliminated to the benefit of ecosystems worldwide. Respiratory diseases that are increasing among

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children in Central New York and elsewhere would decline as airborne particulate emissions are reduced.

These benefits are reasonable outcomes of the hydrogen economy under construction in the scientific laboratories and research offices in America's colleges and universities, and in government and industry facilities. In Syracuse, we see evidence of this work at the SUNY Center for Sustainable and Renewable Energy, located at the College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where scientists are building on nearly a century of experience with renewable products.

Scientists affiliated with the Center for Sustainable and Renewable Energy are investigating production of hydrogen using the renewable energy of sunlight to power electrolysis and, in turn, create power. No carbon dioxide is created in this process.

Researchers at the ESF have already gasified biomass (scientists' name for plant material such as fast-growing shrubs, agricultural residue such as corn stover and wood waste such as sawdust), and they understand the potential for deriving hydrogen from gasified willow. Our scientists have already demonstrated the ability to make hydrogen using specially acclimated microbes that metabolize wood sugars, producing hydrogen as a byproduct. Most exciting is the potential for producing plentiful, affordable hydrogen through distributive biotechnical generators.

There are more, still unexplored, opportunities for the Center for Sustainable and Renewable Energy to develop technologies to produce hydrogen. These include using off-peak hydroelectric power, wind power and nuclear power to produce electric power and, through the electrolysis of water, hydrogen.

We have developed the technology. The scientists and researchers are already at work. The national need has become more pressing in recent weeks. The only thing left is to act on the solution.

The consequences of our action - or inaction - will be life-altering. We owe it to our children to take the right steps. Cornelius B. Murphy Jr. is president of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

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