

A Question of Balance:
Stepping to the Plate and Doing Something
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For: The Wheel

Al Gore won the Nobel Peace Prize today for his work in making us all aware of the frailty of our planet, and he's encouraging us to take action to reverse the damage we've done. While politics is something that we'll avoid here, let's all acknowledge that Vice President Gore has helped highlight issues that we all need to be more knowledgeable about – so that our opinions, AND actions are informed ones.

I was pondering this concept when this news broke, and took this “breaking news” as inspiration to proceed with this somewhat off-topic article for the Wheel. Folks, our hobby is about burning hydro-carbons. It's a stark reality, and one that we should fess up to. Otherwise we stand the risk of not only looking like the ostrich with the head in the sand. The result could be that some agency could deal our hobby a critical blow that we might not even see coming. Two key questions occur to thinking individuals that are passionate about motorsports. One: Does our use of fossil fuels and creation of pollution threaten the long-term future of our hobby? And, Two: If the answer to # 1 is “Yes,” then what are we going to do about it? Are we going to remain in the state of denial? Are we going to cling to the fact that we are, in the grand scheme of things, a tiny user of fuels, so that our impact is nominal? Are we going to adopt an approach to the issue that says, “I'll use all the gas I need til it runs out, then I'll buy a sailboat for the next hobby?” Now that we are ensconced in a subject that is rife with controversy, apathy, passion, and in some cases, anger, I'll try to offer some gentle comments that might be helpful in opening dialogue.

I attended an alternative fuels conference held by the Western Automotive Journalists this week and got an eye and earful. I matured during the “Age of Aquarius” in the 60's and 70's, but never really embraced most of their message. Some of it lost credibility for me when I took a college physics class in 1973 in which the textbook stated that we were on our last 20 years of fossil fuels. Yeah, right – instant loss of credibility. Should have bought Chevron or Royal Dutch Shell stock instead! The message of save the earth from the 60's was so alarmist and extreme that the polarization that resulted stood in the way of real progress. Yes, we dropped lead out of gasoline (thanks, California), and the EPA, governmental regulations, and many responsible corporations and citizens have done some quality work over the years to improve many areas of previous abuse. But we have been largely reliant on technology improvements and have not really changed many habits, continuing to put the hammer down as we have learned to love \$3.00 per gallon gas.

So we have this love of cars. Fast cars. Lots of fast cars. Run on race tracks 100 miles or more from our homes. Yikes. We use gas. We make noise. We pollute. Sounds like the intro to a 12 step program. What can we do to mitigate these stark realities? A simple answer: SOMETHING!! Yes, I think it's a good idea that we all look at our hobby/passion and see how we can play smarter, AND make some changes in the rest of our lives to try to bring some balance. This has to do with what we do when we're not wrenching, towing, testing, driving, racing and towing again – back at home. How about making an ultra-low emissions vehicle a priority with our next personal car? Maybe converting the oak wood fireplace to a pellet stove? Is it a radical thought that if we blow through 3 tanks of gas on a weekend, that we make an extra

effort to carpool to the next Niners game? Do we have an efficient HVAC system in our home, or is it time to replace the coal stove with a state of the art heat pump instead of buying that extra set of BBS wheels? Maybe some solar panels would be a great holiday gift. Another way of looking at this – Are we, because we drive cars as hobbies – by default contributing to the “problem?” And if we are, do we say to ourselves “Ah, the global warming thing is still controversial, I’m on the side of blatant disregard and conspicuous consumption – to heck with it...not my problem!” Or do we acknowledge that conservation, when we have the opportunity, can NOT be a bad thing?

It should be acknowledged that motorsports can be a real-world research and development opportunity for new, cleaner automotive engineering – the clean diesel Audi R10 cleaning house at Le Mans is a great example of our positive platform for future technology. Even the alternative energy experts at our conference agreed that if a new technology can survive in competition, it’s a huge step forward for it becoming a reality. But we need to face it: SCCA members, we need to be extra diligent where we can use less resources, recycle more, pollute less, because we are having a negative effect on our environment as a result of our motorsports interests.

Here’s a motion from the floor – I’m hoping that I can find a second. “I move that the SCCA drop leaded gasoline from the GCR for competition season in 2011, giving competitors 3 years to prepare for unleaded racing fuel.” Possibly with the exception of vintage automobiles, there is no reason why we cannot evolve to unleaded gasoline. IRL is on straight ethanol, NASCAR, for goodness sake, dropped leaded fuel last year. I’ve quietly mentioned this in high places at the Club, and I get two things – “We’re such a small user that it doesn’t really matter.” And/or, “I just love my T.O.E. high compression engine and I don’t want to change it.” Action on this suggestion needs to come from national SCCA leadership and I encourage you to communicate with them on this. This is just one of the many things we might be able to do as a sport to tackle this issue head-on. Can we carpool workers to events? Could the pace car be a hybrid? Should we retire our stinky two-cycle paddock cruisers? No controversy here – we either make a decision to do something, or don’t.

I’m going to summarize this hopefully not-too-controversial piece by saying that it’s time for the SCCA to do some introspection, acknowledge the realities of our sport, and get ahead of the curve by taking the actions that we can, where we can. And secondly, what can it hurt for us, as users of hydrocarbons to do the same soul-searching to find where we might mitigate our impact?



At the aforementioned WAJ conference, many exciting solutions were discussed and several cars were paraded about. The one that seemed to make the most sense in the short term to achieve this balance, was a car that is being developed by both PG&E, and Calcars.org, a group encouraging manufacturers to move aggressively with fuel economy and emissions issues. The car is simply called the “Plug-in Hybrid.” This is a very basic concept, making it easy to sell to me. Succinctly put, take a current hybrid automobile, add additional battery capacity (roughly 125 lbs, the size of one medium suitcase), thus extending the range of the hybrid while using electricity by double, and the gas mileage to the 70-100mpg range. This is the best of the gasoline/electric car world – plug in your car in the evening, during low demand PG&E time when most of the power grid is from clean sources, and you have a car with good room, decent power and torque, with no limitations to range. Other exciting developments were the clean diesel Audi that we drove – a fast luxury sedan that burns clean and gets 35mpg. The message was clear; that the auto manufacturers are very serious about this and you’ll be seeing real progress very soon.

I hope that this article is well-received, and that I’m not the only SCCA member who has previously been oblivious to fuel-related issues, but who is now waking up at least a bit... I guess Al has made his point with me. While we may not agree with him on a lot of his perspectives, what’s clear is that we have to start somewhere, and why not now!