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Leaders addicted to oil

Congress must take first step in breaking a destructive energy habit

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Congress should act now to protect the environment, enhance national security and save consumers money.

It can do this when legislators meet to reconcile House and Senate energy bills, if they require our cars and trucks to go farther on a gallon of gas.

Raising fuel economy standards to 35 miles per gallon from the present level of 27.5 would reduce our oil use by 1.6 million barrels per day, substantially cut heat-trapping pollution and save drivers \$61 billion at the gas pump, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.

But our political leaders will achieve these important goals only if they master their oil addiction. And it's theirs - not ours.

When President Bush proclaimed that "America is addicted to oil" in the 2006 State of the Union address, he confused the issue. It is not the American public that is addicted to oil, but its leaders.

The reality is that we don't care if our cars run on gasoline, electricity or bananas, so long as they provide safe, convenient, reliable and affordable personal transportation.

That's not to say that our cars aren't part of an oil problem. Motor vehicles are responsible for nearly a quarter of our nation's annual carbon-dioxide emissions, the primary heat-trapping pollutant causing climate change. But we would drive them whatever the fuel. We like our vehicles. We don't care what we put in the tank.

Unlike us, however, our elected officials do have an oil-addiction problem, and they won't address it.

Despite the threats to our well-being from heat-trapping gases and other air and water pollutants associated with fossil fuel use, the 2005 energy bill signed by Bush disregards the international scientific consensus that

continued reliance on fossil fuels will alter the ecological balance that supports human civilization.

Like the addict who destroys his life rather than face the truth, the president and his supporters cling to a fantasy that we can drill and burn our way out of our present energy dilemma.

Their addictive behavior is rewarded with campaign contributions. From 1990 through 2006, the oil and gas industry has written more than \$200 million in checks to congressional campaigns. The auto industry, which has contributed to its own problems by resisting strengthened fuel economy standards, chipped in an additional \$117.5 million over the same period, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Our leaders' addiction has clouded their vision and left our nation drifting and vulnerable.

Fortunately, we are not powerless or helpless, and we have the technology to move us away from a fossil-fuel-based economy. This is a moral obligation. Our reliance on fossil fuels destroys the environment and sacrifices our grandchildren's future.

Today we are in the thrall of a destructive system of delivering energy. Congress and the president should heed the words of President Lincoln, who in the 1862 State of the Union address called upon the nation "to disenthral ourselves, and then we will save our country."

Andrew Gunther is executive director of the Center for Ecosystem Management in Oakland, Calif. He wrote this for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine.