

## The Upsides of High Oil and Food Prices

Ralph C. Martin

“Can you even squeeze \$10 of gas into that thing?” He might have said ‘tin can’ instead of ‘thing.’ The wind was driving snow into my face and my vision and hearing were challenged. He was in the shadow of his vehicle, about three or four times the size of mine. “Nowadays I can,” I said, with a smile.

One upside of high oil prices is that vehicle size may decrease. Excess material cocoons one or two occupants in many vehicles, without cargo, along highways and urban roads. [In Canada, between 2013 and 2016, pickup truck occupants were 2.5 times more likely to kill the driver of a car, compared to car-vs.-car collisions](#) and extra gas is required to propel the bulk of a truck.

I recall a farmer who sold firewood by the pickup load, from a large pile on his farm. He claimed to be doing the town boys a favour by providing them with an excuse to own their trucks. In 2021, [four of the five top selling vehicles in Canada were pickups](#). How many trucks could we chuck, if those trucks don’t chuck wood?

Electric vehicles (EV) make more sense as oil prices rise although I’ve heard that EV sales are sputtering because they are still too small. Whether powered by internal combustion engines or batteries, more energy is needed as vehicle size increases. Smaller rather than larger EVs will reduce the need to mine lithium, cobalt and nickel for batteries and they are cheaper than most pickups.

Other upsides of high oil prices are faster adoption of heat pumps, geothermal energy, [passive houses](#) and public transportation. While high oil prices may justify redistribution of current oil and gas supplies they could tip us toward more drilling, a definitive downside given [IPCC’s ‘bleakest warning yet’ on impacts of climate breakdown](#). However, with determination, we could have more energy sovereignty in Canada by accelerating clean energy production. Related to the size of vehicles, there is an opportunity to reduce the size of living space per person and to transform housing availability.

An upside of higher food prices is that we might nibble less, thus reducing health costs and reduce wasted food. In Canada, the value of wasted food per year is [\\$49.5 billion](#) (with

associated costs it is 2.5 times higher) and the total of avoidable and unavoidable wasted food is tallied at 58% of all food.

[Canadians spent 10.7% of their disposable income on food in 2021](#). In my opinion, food is still too cheap and if our system is structured for consumers to avoid paying the real costs of growing, processing and distributing food, then food will continue to be treated like a convenient commodity.

Food warrants respect. It is through food that nutrients and energy flow from Earth into ourselves. Ecological relationships require care and warrant full payments. Ecology is long term economics and if that foundation is compromised, then long term poverty and poor health are inevitable.

I understand that higher oil and food prices are serious setbacks to low-income Canadians. A few years ago, I attended a meeting of food company executives who were demonstrably delighted about keeping food prices low. As I listened, I pondered other information about how they squeeze employee wages, arm twist to pay farmers less, escalate volumes and seduce customers to overconsume with excess proportions of salt, fat and sugar.

Unfortunately, high oil prices are gut punches to those who must travel to work or haul supplies in rural areas with poor or non-existent public transportation. As oil and natural gas prices increase, so will the cost of food production, especially as nitrogen fertilizer costs rise in lock step with energy prices.

I am not convinced that poverty will be solved indirectly, with lower food and oil prices. In my opinion, poverty must be addressed directly. A [guaranteed liveable income](#) is probably the most effective solution.

In Canada we have the luxury of tackling the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine with higher prices and living more efficiently. In countries such as the [Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mali and Sudan, food shortages](#) will be exacerbated and risks of famine are increasing. A global economic system of acquisition and marginalization results in more casualties during a crisis. Why does it take a war to make us recalibrate the rankings of humanity's wants and needs?

There is a pending drama of "I quit" versus "you're fired" with respect to cutting off Russian oil purchases or the Russians turning off the taps to Europe. The immediate repercussions on national economies could be severe, especially in least developed nations, who

deserve our help, with or without Russian oil and wheat. In Europe and North America, high oil and food prices may be the jab in the ribs that will make us grumble until we see the benefits of wasting less, consuming less and focusing on higher values.

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*Information on book, Food Security: From Excess to Enough at [www.ralphmartin.ca](http://www.ralphmartin.ca)*