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In August, I highlighted the concept of the "Critical Issues Forum," and I asked for your feedback. Here's what one member wrote, "My advice would be to quit just batting around and do it!" And this is exactly what *CEP* is going to do — we are going to "just do it." In next month's issue, the concept is going to become a reality.

There are so many hot-button issues to discuss, it's difficult to decide where to start. Since one of the subjects of the first "Critical Issues Series" was alternative energy sources, it seems appropriate that we start there, too. At the heart of this subject is today's petroleum-based economy. While the environmental impacts of using fossil fuels is well known, it has become increasingly clear that the global dependency on oil is also a major issue.

Currently, global oil supplies are straining to meet world demand, while surplus production capacity has dwindled to 1% of total demand, note many analysts. Making matters worse are today's global events — the continuing unrest in Iraq, the turbulence in Venezuela and Russia, and even the impact of hurricane Ivan on the Gulf of Mexico (according to the federal Minerals Management Service, about 7.8 million barrels of oil production have been halted as of time of publication). These events and others have sent jitters reverberating through the market, resulting in oil prices surging to around \$45/bbl. With the chemicals industries being heavily energy-intensive and extremely sensitive to the price of oil, companies are experiencing tough times. Should the price of oil remain at this level, chances are, many plants will have to shutter since they are no longer capable of operating within economic reason.

So we return to the critical issue, how can the dependency on oil be diminished? For many, the first subject that comes to mind is the much-publicized "hydrogen economy," which promises to solve the oil-dependency concern and eliminate the environmental issues surrounding oil. But, upon closer inspection, the hydrogen economy is much more complicated than just developing the technology. Hydrogen, as many naysayers will point out, is an energy carrier and not an energy source. And in many cases, fossil fuels are required to produce hydrogen, which rather defeats the purpose of the hydrogen economy. Furthermore, hydrogen is highly flammable and difficult to store. But, can these hurdles be overcome to make the hydrogen economy a reality?

Look in the November issue for in-depth discussion on the pros and cons of the hydrogen economy. See if you agree with what our authors have to say, and then weigh in by e-mailing your thoughts to cepedit@aiche.org.

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