

The New York Times

Wheels

The Nuts and Bolts of Whatever Moves You

OCTOBER 20, 2009, 1:09 PM

Betting Against Hydrogen

By *JIM MOTAVALLI*

In 1980, Paul Ehrlich, a population activist and Stanford professor, [famously bet](#) Julian Simon, the late Cato Institute scholar, that, because of human pressures, the prices of five key metals would rise by 1990. In fact, the prices fell and Mr. Ehrlich paid a small sum to Mr. Simon.

In 2007, the climate blogger and the author of [“The Hype About Hydrogen,”](#) Joseph Romm, staged a similar bet with Greg Blencoe, chief executive of the Tennessee-based

Jim Motavalli for The New York Times A hydrogen refueling station in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Hydrogen Discoveries, asserting that hydrogen would remain a “future fuel.” Specifically, Mr. Blencoe would win if hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles hit 1 percent of new car and light-truck sales in the United States by 2015 or any year before. If he lost, Mr. Romm would pay \$1,000 and agree to be photographed wearing a T-shirt saying, “I Was Wrong About Hydrogen.” Conversely, Mr. Blencoe’s shirt would say, “Joseph Romm Was Right About Hydrogen.”

Mr. Blencoe [claimed victory](#) on the two-year anniversary of the bet, but Mr. Romm is unbowed. “It was a sucker bet,” Mr. Romm said in an interview. “I’m willing to triple the terms to \$3,000, even though he has Congress on his side.”

Mr. Romm was referring to Congressional approval (with a Senate vote Oct. 15) of [nearly \\$200 million in hydrogen research funding](#). The appropriation is awaiting a signature from President Obama. The vote represented a [rejection of the energy secretary, Steven Chu’s, attempt](#) last May to reduce funding of hydrogen and fuel cells. Mr. Chu said at the time, “Is it likely in the next 10 or 15, 20 years that we will convert to a hydrogen-car economy? The answer, we felt, was ‘no.’” Mr. Chu has since become more conciliatory, though [he said recently](#) that fuel cells will need “four miracles,” one more than required for sainthood, to succeed.

Mr. Blencoe, whose company markets hydrogen pipeline and storage technology, declined the raising of the stakes. “It’s not about money,” he said in an interview. “I don’t care about that. What matters is getting the facts straight, and fuel-cell cars will absolutely be viable in 2015.” Mr. Blencoe said that higher gasoline prices and the short range of battery cars will send buyers to fuel-cell vehicles. He predicted adjusted-for-inflation hydrogen prices in 2015 at \$6 to \$8 a gallon equivalent (aided by fuel-cell

vehicle fuel efficiency that he said was comparable to 60 miles per gallon).

Hydrogen research money [is now assured](#), but larger federal support for a national refueling network remains a big hurdle.

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