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At Issue

Dear Lithium: A Dear John Letter

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We never had a chance to fall in love

By David Mantey, Editor, PD&D

I get it, I get it. We're a culture that loves buzzwords. iPhone, Palm Pre, energy efficiency, green, change, synergize, monetize, functionality, stimulus, Tesla, etc. The list is long and can be efficiently compiled, even though it's in a constant state of fluctuation, by looking at the top stories on any aggregate or social site.

Just look at the top stories on reddit or Digg. Look at the most read news stories on **CNN.com**. Look at this newsletter and the *PD&D* site: If we feature anything on Tesla, our servers go into cardiac arrest and our IT Scotsman burns his mustache administering mouth-to-mouth.

All things lithium or Li-ion typically make the top 10 on this list, and I'm not sure the position is warranted. After all, few know what it is, where it comes from and how much of it is buried under the earth's surface.

We only need to know that this green efficient technology will help power our gadgets, replace fossil fuels, help alleviate the pain we're feeling at the pump, cure noise and noxious pollution woes and pull a golden-egg-laying rabbit out of a 40-story hat.

I was speaking with Scott Redmond, chairman of XP Vehicles, when he casually mentioned the limited amount of lithium – and how more than half of this green power stash was located in a country that typically hasn't played nice with others. I didn't brush off the comment, but I offered an agreeable 'Right, right,' and continued with my line of questioning for the cover story that I'll shamelessly plug and link to now: **The Inflatable Car**.

I was working out the article when the comment came back to me. Limited lithium? That can't be. Our country would never make a fool-hearted investment and risk billions of tax payer dollars on a technology with a finite amount of resources. Top story: **Energy Dept. to lend $8B to Ford, Nissan, Tesla**.

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If two of these companies figure it out, the forecasted lithium shortage could happen much sooner than 2015.

Back to the green revolution getting stalled in South America. Bolivia is the potential owner of 5.4 million tons of lithium under the Salar de Uyuni salt desert (about half the worlds supply). According to an article run in the **Guardian (UK)**, "Bolivia's socialist government has a habit of clashing with foreign multinationals in other sectors and has not clinched a deal – and, according to some, may never seal one – with the investors needed to extract significant quantities of lithium."

The holder of Bolivia's most interesting title, Mining & Metallurgy Minister Luis Alberto Echazu hopes to extract 1,200 tons of lithium next year, with exponentially more to follow as the operation becomes more efficient in subsequent years. Right now, the government is building a bungalow to house technicians and miners for a pilot plant that seems dangerously similar to Fordlandia.

The government is in the market for a partner, but foreign companies have been afraid to work with a government that "confiscates assets and rips up contracts."

Not only is there a finite number of lithium resources, but it seems unlikely that Bolivia will find a way to harness its potential.

No lithium for the batteries and a desert that is once again known for nothing more than being salty.

Lithium,

It's just not working for me. You say you're going to be there for me and then you never show. Do you know how embarrassing it was to describe to my friends? I sit in your driveway waiting for hours, only to have your father come out and say, 'It's not going to happen. it's over. I'm done playing games. Thanks for nothing, I'm keeping the toaster.'

Dictated but not read.

Is lithium the answer? Comment below …

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