

[By Neal Goswami](#)

Vermont Rep. Peter Welch is renewing his call for tapping the country's oil reserve to help lower gas prices that have been steadily rising.

According to Welch, a Democrat, gas prices are the highest they have ever been at this time of year. Tapping the Strategic Petroleum Reserve could help ease prices and avoid stalling a fragile economic recovery, Welch said Tuesday in a telephone interview.

"I think the price spike in gasoline and heating oil is a real threat to the consumer and the economy," he said. "Yes, this is a threat to the fragile economic recovery we are in."

According to GasBuddy.com, the national average for a gallon of gasoline on Tuesday was \$3.67. The average in Vermont was \$3.78.

Welch and two House colleagues, Reps. Ed Markey, D-Mass., and Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., wrote a letter to President Barack Obama last week urging him to again tap the reserve. They cited posturing by Iran, and speculators using the uncertainty to drive up prices, in the letter.

"It is essential that the United States have an aggressive strategy for releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to combat the speculators capitalizing on the fear in oil markets and to send a message to Iran that we are ready, willing, and able to deploy our oil reserves," the trio wrote. "Signaling that the United States will continue to employ an aggressive SPR policy in the near term would send a strong signal to oil markets responding to the unrest in the Middle East."

Welch also called for tapping the reserve last year as oil and gas prices rose during the uprising in Libya. "At first the White House was silent, then quietly posited, then eventually accepted our recommendation," he said. The U.S. release of 30 million barrels of oil, along with 30 million barrels released from the reserves of other countries, helped drive down oil prices by 8 percent,

Welch said.

Stabilizing the oil market requires a long-term solution, but tapping the reserve can help alleviate pressure on consumers now, and help to avoid stalling economic growth, Welch said.

"We definitely need a long-term solution, but we've got a short-term problem that has escalated because of Wall Street speculation," he said. "It sends a shot across the bow of Wall Street speculators who jump on the consumer as energy markets go haywire."

Releasing oil from the reserve will help counter the actions of speculators, according to Welch. "If this were a supply-demand problem, it wouldn't be as effective. But, where it's a speculation problem, it can really send big-time fear into the hearts of speculators," Welch said.

The SPR is currently holding about 696 million barrels and is filled to more than 95 percent of its capacity, according to Welch. Releasing the oil now, and replenishing it when prices are cheaper, is good for taxpayers, he said.

High gas prices are catching the attention of members of Congress of all political stripes, Welch said. "What I do know is that there's enormous bipartisan interest in the gas price spike. The question for Congress, basically, is are we going to use this as a political football or are we going to propose real solutions," he said.