



CRS Report for Congress

U.S. Trade Deficit and the Impact of Rising Oil Prices

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Summary

Petroleum prices have risen sharply since early 2005. At the same time the average amount of imports of energy-related petroleum products has fallen slightly. The combination of sharply rising prices and a slightly lower level of imports of energy-related petroleum products translates into an escalating cost for those imports. This rising cost added an estimated \$70 billion to the nation's trade deficit in 2005 and \$50 billion in 2006. Imported energy prices moderated in January, February, and March 2007, but began rising again in April and May, following a pattern of rising energy import prices in the spring and summer. This report provides an estimate of the initial impact of the rising oil prices on the nation's merchandise trade deficit. This report will be updated as warranted by events.

Background

According to data published by the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce,¹ the prices of petroleum products over the past year have fluctuated sharply, at times rising considerably faster than the change in demand for those products. As a result, the price increases of imported energy-related petroleum products worsened the U.S. trade deficit in 2005 and 2006, and likely will do so again in 2007. Energy-related petroleum products is a term used by the Census Bureau that includes crude oil, petroleum preparations, and liquefied propane and butane gas. Crude oil comprises the largest share by far within this broad category of energy-related imports. The increase in the trade deficit is expected to have a slightly negative impact on U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) and could place further downward pressure on the dollar against a broad range of other currencies. To the extent that the additions to the merchandise trade deficit are returned to the U.S. economy

¹ Census Bureau, Department of Commerce. Report FT900, *U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services*, June 8, 2007. Table 17. The report and supporting tables are available at [http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/Press-Release/current_press_release/ftdpress.pdf].

as payment for additional U.S. exports or to acquire such assets as securities or U.S. businesses, some of the negative effects could be mitigated.

Table 1 presents summary data from the Census Bureau for the change in the volume, or quantity, of energy-related petroleum imports and the change in the price, or the value, of those imports for 2006 and for 2007. The data indicate that the United States imported 4.9 billion barrels of total energy-related petroleum products in 2006, valued at \$291 billion. Through April 2007, the quantity of energy-related petroleum imports fell by 0.8%, while crude oil imports rose slightly from the same period in 2006, reflecting a milder-than-normal winter. During the same period, the value of energy-related petroleum products imports fell by 1.5%, while the value of crude oil imports fell by 0.4%. As **Figure 1** shows, imports of energy-related petroleum products can vary sharply on a monthly basis, but averaged about 410 barrels a month in 2006.

Table 1. Summary Data of U.S. Imports of Energy-Related Petroleum Products, Including Oil (not seasonally adjusted)

	January through April					
	2006		2007			
	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Value (thousands of dollars)	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Percent change 2006 to 2007	Value (thousands of dollars)	Percent change 2006 to 2007
Total energy-related Petroleum Products	1,586,902	\$88,331,752	1,574,690	-0.8%	\$86,963,080	-1.5%
Crude oil	1,201,838	\$64,442,185	1,201,999	0.0%	\$64,186,320	-0.4%

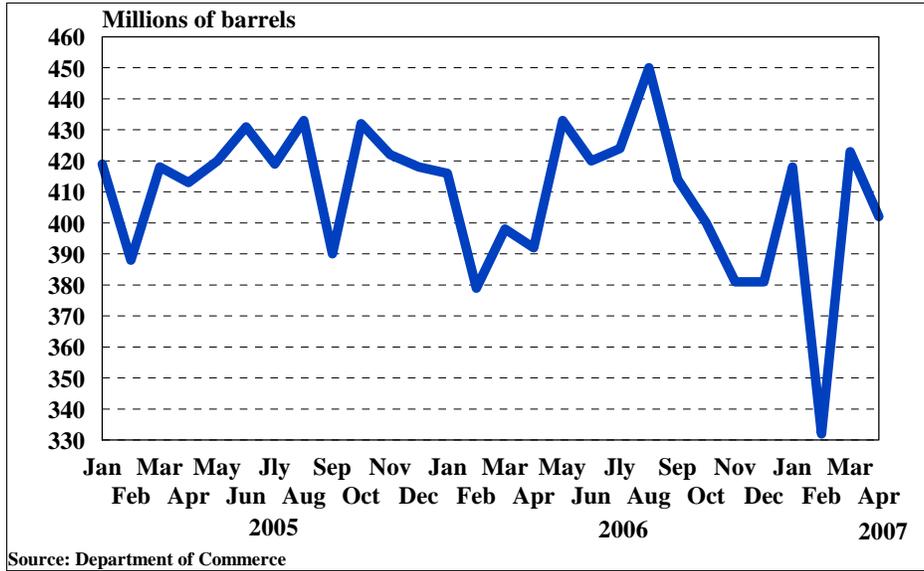
	January through December					
	2006		2007			
	(Actual values)		(Estimated values)			
	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Value (thousands of dollars)	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Percent change 2006 to 2007	Value (thousands of dollars)	Percent change 2006 to 2007
Total energy-related Petroleum Products	4,887,772	\$291,285,295	4,850,158	-0.8%	\$286,771,923	-1.5%
Crude oil	3,741,205	\$216,998,507	3,741,706	0.0%	\$216,136,924	-0.4%

Source: Census Bureau, Department of Commerce. Report FT900, *U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services*, June 8, 2007. Table 17.

Note: Estimates for January through December of 2007 were developed by CRS from data through the first four months of 2007 and data through 2006 published by the Census Bureau using a straight line extrapolation.

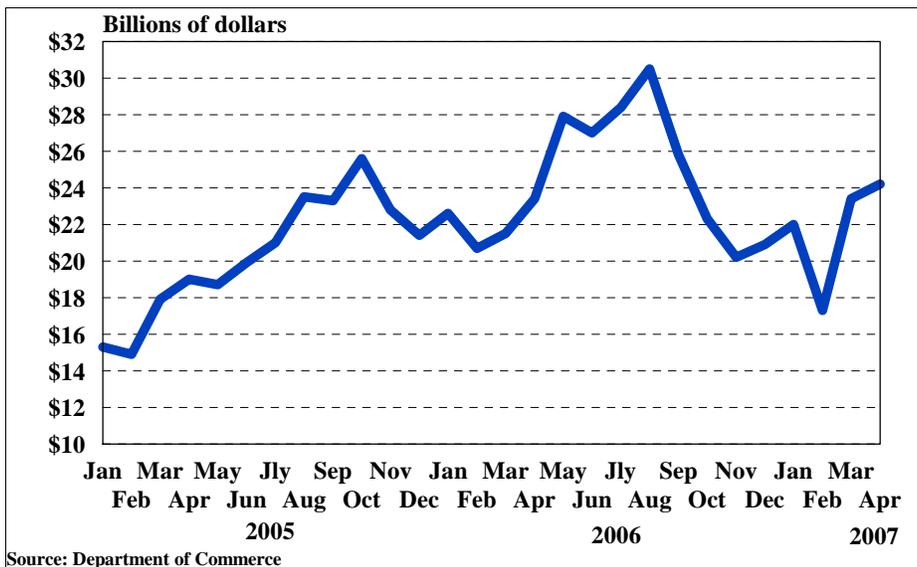
In value terms, energy-related imports rose from about \$243 billion in 2005 to \$291 billion in 2006, or an increase of 19.6% to account for about 16% of the value of total U.S. merchandise imports. An estimate for 2007, based on data for the first three months of 2007, indicate a slow start to the seasonal rise in energy prices, compared with the

Figure 1. Quantity of U.S. Imports of Energy-Related Petroleum Products



sharp rise experienced in 2005 and 2006. Price data for April and May 2007, however, show a sharp run-up in the price of imported energy in those months and likely will exert considerable upward pressure on forthcoming estimates of the total cost of energy imports for 2007. As **Figure 2** shows, the cost of U.S. imports of energy-related petroleum products has risen from about \$15 billion per month in early 2005 to more than \$30 billion a month in August 2006, before falling back to \$20 billion a month in December 2006 and \$24 billion in April 2007. Data for 2006 indicate that a slight decrease in the quantity of imports combined with nearly a 20% increase in the price of imported energy products caused the U.S. trade deficit in energy to rise by about \$50 billion to reach nearly

Figure 2. Value of U.S. Imports of Energy-Related Petroleum Products



\$300 billion. After rising steadily since March 2006, the average price of oil retreated in September through November before rising slightly again in December 2006.

At an average price of \$58 per barrel in 2006, average oil import prices are 24% higher than they were in the comparable period in 2005, as indicated in **Table 2**. As a result of the overall rise in the value of energy-related imports in 2006, such imports rose to \$270 billion in 2006 to account for 32% of the total \$836 billion U.S. trade deficit, up from one-fifth of the total trade deficit in less than two years. This is still less than the average share during much of the 1990s, when energy imports at times accounted for half of the overall U.S. trade deficit.

Table 2. U.S. Imports of Energy-Related Petroleum Products, Including Crude Oil (not seasonally adjusted)

Period	Total energy-related petroleum products ^a		Crude oil			
	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Value (thousands of dollars)	Quantity (thousands of barrels)	Thousands of barrels per day (average)	Value (thousands of dollars)	Unit price (dollars)
2006						
Jan. - Dec.	4,887,772	291,285,295	3,741,205	10,250	216,998,507	58.00
January	415,788	22,579,751	302,812	9,768	15,724,715	51.93
February	378,721	20,738,047	291,032	10,394	15,635,550	53.72
March	397,983	21,517,289	312,479	10,080	16,330,455	52.26
April	392,159	23,396,506	293,844	9,795	16,695,611	56.82
May	433,399	27,906,197	323,827	10,446	19,992,671	61.74
June	420,067	26,958,936	330,862	11,029	20,527,259	62.04
July	423,624	28,438,931	321,576	10,373	20,849,998	64.84
August	450,451	30,497,305	343,485	11,080	22,710,736	66.12
September	413,659	25,808,397	316,591	10,553	19,792,869	62.52
October	399,830	22,315,158	311,758	10,057	17,292,560	55.47
November	381,230	20,238,356	299,401	9,980	15,642,961	52.25
December	380,861	20,890,421	293,538	9,469	15,803,122	53.84
2007						
January	418,158	22,010,536	320,108	10,326	16,720,818	52.23
February	331,818	17,347,440	252,869	9,031	12,822,771	50.71
March	422,671	23,366,614	324,248	10,460	17,186,586	53.00
April	402,043	24,238,490	304,775	10,159	17,456,146	57.28

Source: Census Bureau, Department of Commerce. Report FT900, *U.S. International Transactions in Goods and Services*. June 8, 2007. Table 17.

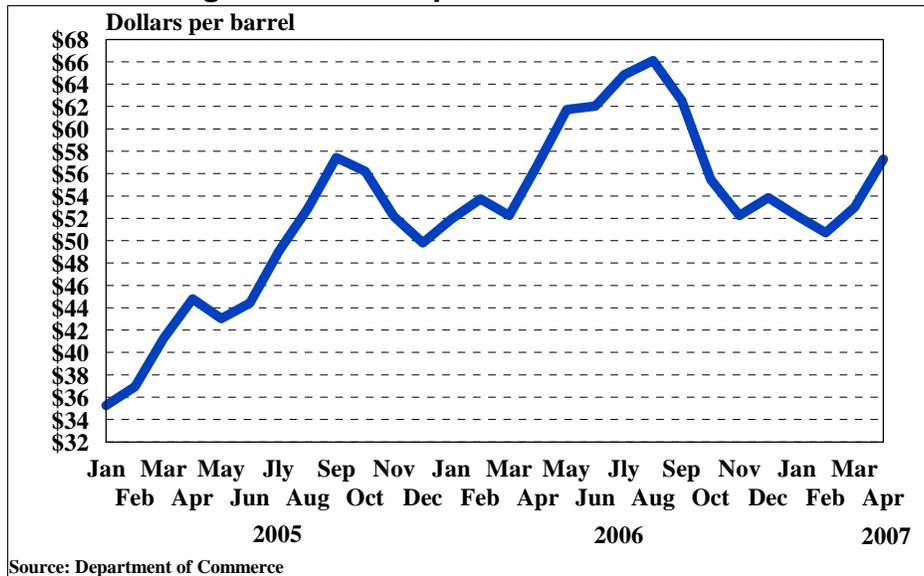
Note: Energy-related petroleum products is a term used by the Census Bureau and includes crude oil, petroleum preparations, and liquefied propane and butane gas.

Recent data indicate that the drop in imported energy prices to about \$54 per barrel toward the end of 2006 from the high of an average of \$66 per barrel reached in August

2006 helped reduce the overall cost of energy imports so that the trade deficit in 2006 rose by about \$50 billion, an amount equivalent to an increase of about 7% in the merchandise trade deficit due to higher oil prices. In terms of the U.S. economy, the estimated rise in the trade deficit from the increase in oil prices in 2005 is equivalent to about one-half of a percentage point of U.S. nominal GDP. In a letter to Congress' Joint Economic Committee, Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan estimated that higher energy prices since the end of 2003 have lowered U.S. GDP by three-fourths of a percentage point in 2005 after having reduced growth by about one-half a point in 2004.²

Crude oil comprises the largest share of energy-related petroleum products imports. According to Census Bureau data³ as shown in **Table 2**, imports of crude oil fell from an average of 10.28 million barrels of crude oil imports per day in 2005 to an average of 10.25 million barrels per day in 2006, or a decrease of less than one percent. In December 2006, such imports averaged 9.5 million barrels per day, or a decrease of 6.6% from the volume of such imports recorded in December 2005. Overall, data for oil imports based on year-over-year data indicate that oil volumes decreased by 0.4% in 2006 from the respective period in 2005. From 2005 to 2006, the average price of crude oil increased from \$46.81 per barrel to \$58.00 per barrel for an increase of 24%, as shown in **Figure 3**. As a result, the value of U.S. energy-related imports rose from about \$18 billion a month in March 2005 to about \$30 billion a month in September 2006, before falling to \$21 billion a month in December 2006, the lowest monthly total recorded since July 2005.

Figure 3. U.S. Import Price of Crude Oil



Data for 2007 indicate that a milder-than-normal winter reduced crude oil imports through March 2007 and average oil import prices, which had dropped nearly 4% from the average prices recorded in January 2007, started rising in March and April. The declines in prices and volumes of oil imports experienced in January and February,

² Aversa, Jeannine, "Oil Prices Said to Slow U.S. Economy a Bit." *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2005.

³ Report FT900, *U.S. International Trade in Goods and Services*, June 8, 2007. Table 17.

however, likely will turn around sharply in April and May, when both import volumes and import prices started moving higher.

Issues for Congress

The rise in prices of energy imports experienced since early 2004 is expected to have a relatively minor impact on the rate of economic growth in 2006, but could pose a number of policy issues for Congress. The impact of the rise in energy import prices may well lessen somewhat as energy prices stabilize or fall slightly for the rest of 2006. It is likely, however, that energy prices will rise rapidly again in 2007, especially in the late spring-early summer period of 2007. Most immediately, the higher prices of energy imports will worsen the nation's merchandise trade deficit and have a disproportionate impact on the energy-intensive sectors of the economy and on households on fixed incomes.

Over the long run, a sustained increase in the prices of energy imports will permanently increase the nation's merchandise trade deficit, although some of this impact could be offset if some of the dollars are returned to the U.S. economy through increased purchases of U.S. goods and services or through purchases of such other assets as securities or U.S. businesses. Also, over the long-run it is possible for the economy to adjust to the higher prices of energy imports by improving its energy efficiency, finding alternative sources of energy, or searching out additional supplies of energy.

For Congress, the increase in the nation's merchandise trade deficit could add to existing pressures to examine the causes of the deficit and to address the underlying factors that are generating that deficit. In addition, the rise in prices of energy imports could add to concerns about the nation's reliance on foreign supplies for energy imports and add impetus to examining the nation's energy strategy. The increased outflow of dollars may well add to public and Congressional concerns about foreign acquisitions of U.S. firms and to concerns about the growing share of outstanding U.S. Treasury securities that are owned by foreigners. While the rise in energy prices can be expected to lead eventually to improvements in energy efficiency and to alternative sources of energy, there may well be increased pressure applied to Congress to assist in this process.