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Notes

Fossil Fuels: What's the Story?

- 1 Why are fuels like gasoline, coal, and natural gas called fossil fuels? The reason is that they come from plant and animal remains, or fossils. Millions of years ago, Earth was covered by water. When plants and animals died, they sank to the ocean floor. As the years passed, they formed a dark, spongy substance called peat. Over millions of years, sand and rocks gradually buried the peat deeper and deeper. Eventually, the fossils of the plants and animals turned into oil, coal, and natural gas. Today, we burn these products for fuel. That's why oil, coal, and natural gas are called "fossil fuels."
- 2 So what's the problem? Let's continue the story. Every living thing has carbon in it. For example, a 100-pound person is 18 pounds of carbon. When we burn a fossil fuel to generate electricity or power a car, boat, or plane, we release the carbon stored in the fuel. For example, one gallon (6.3 pounds) of gasoline produces about 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, or CO_2 . Carbon dioxide, or CO_2 , is a greenhouse gas. It works to trap heat in Earth's atmosphere. This is good, but only up to a point. An increase in CO_2 in the atmosphere can cause Earth's temperature to rise, changing our planet's climate.
- 3 What's being done? Many nations realize the importance of substituting other sources of energy for fossil fuels. They are looking to wind and solar power, for example, to help meet the world's energy needs.