Bye, Bye Helium

Most of us know it as the gas that floats party balloons, blimps, and giant superheroes in holiday parades. But helium also pressurizes rocket engines for NASA and the military, and is crucial for diving equipment, particle accelerators, and MRIs.

The deflating news, says the National Research Council, is that we're running out. Most of the world's helium comes from beneath America's Great Plains, where it's trapped in natural gas. The U.S. began stockpiling it in 1960, but in 1996 opted to get out of the business, recoup its investment, and sell off the reserve. After 2015, other producers—Russia and China have potential sources—will control what's left of the global market: a mere 40 years' worth.

Scientists, including Nobel Prize-winning physicist Robert Richardson, think increasing the price would help preserve the element. Charging big bucks for little balloons (below) may be a party-pooping idea. But it would also encourage the major helium users, like NASA, to recycle—and help the world hold on to its up, up, and away. *—Gretchen Parker*

Price of a helium balloon: **75 cents**

What some say it should cost: **$100**

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