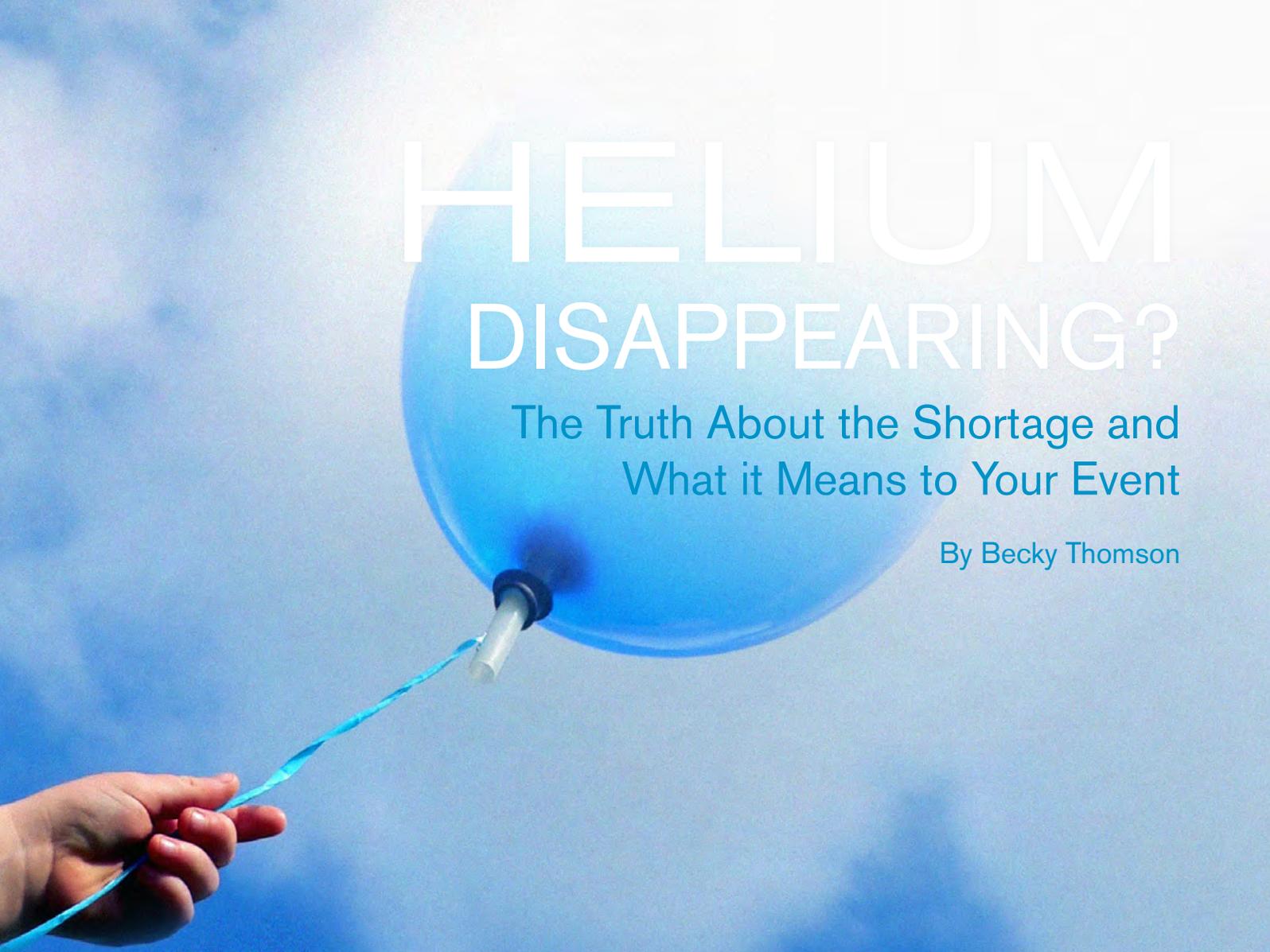


HELIUM DISAPPEARING?

The Truth About the Shortage and
What it Means to Your Event

By Becky Thomson



Helium has been in increasingly short supply across the globe for the past five years, leaving event and party planners scrambling for solutions.

From a consumer's point of view, the shortage is very real, but not for the reasons you might think. The supply is decreasing due to a myriad of factors—in the past several years, the US has had a number of plants shut down for maintenance or operating at partial capacity, leaving many point-of-sale suppliers empty handed. The shortage has far more to do with the lack of refinement resources than actual raw supply.

Understanding the Market

The United States is the largest producer of helium, contributing about 75% to the market worldwide, with a significant portion of that coming from a single pipeline in Texas. In America, the helium supply to public sectors has been dictated by the government controlled National Helium Reserve since 1925, effectively removing it from market influence. In 1996, the government passed the *Helium Privatisation Act*, which directed that the entire reserve be sold off by 2015—the goal being to allow the private market to take over the production and sale of the gas. What lawmakers didn't foresee, however, is that the relatively low sale

price of helium had made it unattractive to private refineries to pick up the production. The question they're facing now is whether there will be anyone to supply the gas once the reserve is sold off.

Remember high school economics? The helium "crisis" that we're facing now is simply bearing out the basic principles of supply and demand. Since the *Privatisation Act*, consumers have been able to purchase helium at prices kept artificially low. The demand for the gas continues to rise—helium is one of the world's most stable inert gases and is used widely in a variety of different industries, including MRI technology and rocket science. Once the government sells off the last of the Helium Reserve, gas supply will be passed to the private market, where the sluggish supply will likely cause an even greater spike in prices.

Helium and Entertainment

Unfortunately, regardless of the reason that helium is scarce, the entertainment industry finds itself at the bottom of the totem pole of supply priority, forcing many events to seek alternatives for traditional go-to decorations like giant parade inflatables and even simple party balloons.

Practically, where does this leave you? When it comes to giant parade inflatables, the lack of gas might have you grounded, but it doesn't have to leave you empty hand-



ed. Check with your inflatable provider for products they can offer you that don't use helium, or use less helium, giving you more bang for your buck. Some helium units can be converted for cold-air (fan driven) use, which are carried down a parade route by volunteers. Others can be inflated on a rolling platform and pulled down the street. These cold-air options will give you the opportunity to avoid helium entirely, without sacrificing the colorful characters that so many parade-goers know and love.

The helium market should eventually level out as private businesses find incentive to meet demand for the gas. In the meantime, though, don't be afraid to get creative—with a little ingenuity, your event can be better than ever, without being held hostage by the uncertain future of helium.

Becky Thomson is the Executive Assistant at Dynamic Displays, home of Fabulous Inflatables™. Riding the cutting edge of the inflatable industry since the early 1960's, Dynamic Displays is a leader in inflatable quality and innovation and the preferred supplier of helium giants for parades and events nationwide. For more information, go to: www.fabulousinflatables.com or call: +1-519-254-9563.