

Living Through Another Wave of Shortages

Just a few short years ago, we all lived through the COVID-19 pandemic, including a huge number of shortages. What started out as the toilet paper shortage of 2020, soon spread to shortages of just about everything in the grocery store and many critical items in the pharmacy.

The long-term effects of the pandemic included shortages on major items, like cars and computers, which lasted a few years. We are just recently seeing car lots full again, as the automotive supply chain has filled with the necessary parts (especially electronic parts) necessary for manufacturers to build cars and trucks once again.

Granted, a lot of the early shortages in that disaster were because of panic buying. There was absolutely no reason for there to be a shortage on toilet paper; but that didn't stop people from buying it. Once the supply started to get short, more and more people bought, trying to ensure that they'd have some if things got even worse.

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The long-term shortages were actually more serious, caused primarily by changes in buying habits, which in turn were caused by the shutdowns. People who were working from home didn't need to replace their cars, because they weren't driving. They didn't need to buy expensive wardrobes to impress everyone at work. Nor did they need to spend money eating at restaurants. On the other hand, many had to upgrade their home computers to work from and bigger television sets

to while away their spare time.

Just as it appeared that we could forget about shortages, a new threat to the American supply chain loomed its ugly head. The International Longshoremen's Association Union threatened a strike, then carried through on it, seeking higher wages and an end to the potential automation of ports. Thirty-six ports on the East Coast and the Gulf of Mexico did shut down, briefly, as longshoremen walked off their jobs. This strike, which fortunately didn't last more than a few days, had the potential of taking us back to the shortages we encountered during and after the pandemic.

Various prognosticators had already started spreading their message of doom, during the days leading up to the deadline and the few days of the strike itself. Had the longshoremen not come to agreement with the United States Marine Alliance, which represented the 36 ports affected by the strike, it could have gone on for weeks or even months. The head of the union had publicly declared that it was his intention to make the country suffer, if he didn't get his way.

But the real message here isn't about the differences of opinion between workers and management, or what a "fair wage" actually is; the real message is that at any point in time, we're only one step away from disaster in our supply chain. Those longshoremen aren't the only ones who could shut things down, making it hard for everyone.

According to some sources, all it would have taken would have been four weeks of those ports being shut down for entire industries to be closing their doors. The first week wouldn't have been too bad. The second would have seen general shortages of all sorts of goods, with prices starting to rise. By the third week, stores will be rationing items, manufacturers will be slowing down, and some will furlough workers, until the supply chain should return to normal. But the fourth week is where things would really get bad, with

small businesses being hit the hardest, just like during COVID. Shelves in the stores that are still open will be pretty bare, with the prices of goods making many things unaffordable to the average family.

That's all the time it takes to put us back into the condition we were in after COVID. It has taken us a couple of years to recover from that, and in some ways, we still aren't fully recovered. This second time around, if it had happened, would have been worse than the first, partially due to panic buying and partially due to the damage building upon previous damage.

Of course, this potential panic isn't over yet. The agreement between the longshoremen and the ports is just a tentative agreement, put in place to end the strike. They don't have a signed contract yet. So, there's still a possibility that things could go south again.

Don't be fooled; we haven't fully returned to pre-pandemic times. There are a lot of things that have changed. The most obvious of these is the high inflation we've had for the last few years; thanks to all those trillion-dollar-plus bills that Congress passed. But our buying habits have changed as well, with people doing their grocery shopping online and picking up their orders at the curb. We're also using much less cash, having gotten into the habit of paying everything with a plastic card.

Let's Break Down Shortages a Bit More

There's a tendency to think of shortages in the extreme. In other words, when we use the word "shortage," people tend to think in terms of there not being any of those items available at all. We experienced that during COVID, especially things that we would normally buy in the grocery store.

But not all shortages are severe like that. The recent Hurricane Helene has turned out to be one of the deadliest hurricanes in history, being the deadliest since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. What didn't look like it was going to be much of a hurricane, turned into a Cat 4 hurricane, with severe winds and huge amounts of inland flooding. The devastation in the Deep South is going to have a major impact on agriculture, creating shortages; specifically, cotton, pecans and peaches. All three of those come from areas which have been severely affected by the storm.

In this particular case, cotton is a short-term problem, which will affect the next year's production of T-shirts, sheets, towels, Q-Tips and clothing in general. So, we can expect to see an increase in price for those items. Unless something happens to damage next year's crop, things should be back to normal, but the prices won't necessarily come back down.

While cotton is a much more important crop, the damage to peach and pecan trees is much more serious. Cotton plants can be grown in a few months, whereas those trees need several years to grow to the point where they are producing fruit and nuts. With miles of orchards having been uprooted, the farmers are going to have a rough go of it, trying to restore their farms.

That doesn't mean there won't be peaches or pecans, it just means that their price will rise. That's the law of Supply and Demand in action. The wealthy will still be able to get as much as they want, as price isn't a problem for them. Those of us in the middle class may make decisions to buy other food items, which are more affordable. We will still see peaches and pecans in our grocery stores; but many of us will likely just pass them by.

The people who will be most affected by those shortages, like all shortages, are the poor. They can't afford to pay more for something, just because it is in short supply. Instead, they

will adjust their buying habits, selecting other items which they can afford.

How Does this Affect Us as Preppers?

We preppers have a tendency to think in terms of TEOTWAWKI events. As part of that, we think that shortages will be extreme, to the point where nothing we need will be available. That's a good way to think, for planning purposes; but we need to understand that it's probably not an accurate reflection of what will happen in the event of a major disaster. Some things will still be available... we just don't know what those things will be. Nor do we know if the things available will be useful.

A large part of why we stockpile critical supplies, is because we don't know what will be available. By stockpiling every essential item we can think of, we ensure that we're going to have what we absolutely need. There will still be things we won't have; but then, I don't think anyone is going to die because they run out of cosmetics or new toys for the kiddies.

Ok, so these supply chain problems aren't the end of the world; but they can be serious. The shortage of things like masks, chlorine bleach, rubber gloves and hand sanitizer during the early stages of the pandemic might have added to the spread of the disease. We'll never really know. But they serve to illustrate the types of problems that a hiccup in the supply chain can cause. Much more seriously than that were the food shortages, leaving the aisles in our grocery stores looking almost barren.

Here's the challenge we face... figuring out what we'll have shortages of, given any particular supply chain problems. One well-known newsie stated that the first thing which would run short would be fresh fruits and vegetables. That took me by

surprise, as I thought most of that, other than tropical fruit, was grown domestically.

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If we succeed in beating the rest of the country in figuring out what's going to run short, then the thing to do is top off our stockpiles with those items. In the situation we just escaped, that probably would have meant buying everything we need for the Christmas holidays early, assuming we have the money to do so; as well as getting what fruits and vegetables we would be able to use, before they went bad.

Looking forward, we need to keep an eye on the condition of our supply lines and what might disrupt them. It has become clear that the supply chain is not as robust as we might have once thought. With something as little as a strike threatening to disrupt 50% of the imported goods and how much we depend on those imports, things like severe weather events, wars, and disgruntled workers can easily create shortages. The key, for us, is to recognize those potential shortages as quickly as possible and take whatever action is necessary to ensure that we're ready for them.

This might lead us to jumping from one potential crisis to another. But then, isn't that what we do as preppers? I can't count up the number of hurricanes I've prepared for; but I've only gone through two. Was it a waste of time to prepare for the others? No; by doing so, I was more prepared when a hurricane actually hit. I can say the same for the 2014 Ebola outbreak. Everything I bought "just in case" it came to the US could have been seen as a waste... until COVID came along.