

Feed a lobbyist, starve a country

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Feed a lobbyist, starve a developing country. The EPA's recent approval of the E15 blend of gasoline— which uses 50 percent more ethanol than the current E10— is just one of many U.S. government policies that favor the corn-based ethanol industry.

Higher profits for corn farmers come at the expense of increased malnutrition in developing countries. By artificially increasing the demand for corn and cropland, government mandates and subsidies for ethanol drive up the price for many agricultural commodities. The ultimate result is higher retail food prices.

"The increased use of ethanol accounted for about 10 percent to 15 percent of the rise in food prices between April 2007 and April 2008," according to a 2009 Congressional Budget Office report.

While far from being the only factor influencing global food prices, ethanol's impact is real— and rising. Government support for ethanol amounts to "subsidized food burning," according to ecologist Dr. David Pimentel of Cornell University. With full implementation of E15 "gasanol," more than 40 percent of the nation's corn crop may be devoted to ethanol production.

Any rise in global food prices could threaten the developing world, where the United Nations reports that nearly 1 billion people are already malnourished. Every year, 6 million children die from hunger-related illnesses before their fifth birthday. Ethanol's exact body count is unknown— and perhaps unknowable— but we must consider if it is acceptable for 5,500 or 500,000 people to die on account of this nation's energy policy.

Thankfully, such daunting considerations are not necessary in a world where ethanol mandates and subsidies fail basic means-end analysis.

Defending the E15 blend, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack claims that "[b]iofuels present an extraordinary opportunity to move away from our dangerous dependence on foreign oil and to reduce risks to our environment." The evidence suggests otherwise. Our government's biofuel of choice, corn-based ethanol, only presents an extraordinary opportunity for special

interest groups to profit at the expense of the general public.

Corn-based ethanol cannot solve dependence on foreign oil. In order to replace gasoline consumption with corn-based ethanol consumption, we would have to devote 120 percent of all U.S. cropland to corn-based ethanol production, estimates Jerry Taylor of the CATO Institute. Of course, doing so would be mathematically and economically impossible.

To complicate matters further, a 2005 study conducted by Dr. David Pimentel of Cornell University and Dr. Tad W. Patzek of University of California, Berkeley found that ethanol production— at any level— only increases U.S. dependence on foreign oil. Corn-based ethanol, according to the study, requires 29 percent more fossil fuels as inputs than it produces. Dr. Pimentel explains that "[e]thanol production requires large fossil energy input, and therefore, it is contributing to oil and natural gas imports and U.S. deficits."

The claim that corn-based ethanol has environmental benefits has been fiercely rebuked by scientific research. Greenhouse gas emissions from ethanol are 93 percent higher than gasoline, according to a 2008 study by ecologist David Tillman of the University of Minnesota. Similarly, a 2008 study by Timothy Searchinger of Princeton University and his colleagues considered the total impact of ethanol usage over 30 years, and found that biofuels have nearly double the greenhouse gas emissions of comparable gasoline usage.

Ethanol also increases air pollution, according to a 2005 study by Australian academic Dr. Robert Niven. E10 usage causes higher levels of photochemical smog and toxic compounds than traditional gasoline, and the pollution caused by E85— a blend of 85% ethanol and 15 percent gasoline— is even worse.

Water pollution is another environmental hazard exacerbated by ethanol production. Because corn cultivation requires more pesticides and fertilizers than other crops, the National Academy of Sciences warns that increased domestic production of corn-based ethanol could result in "considerable" harm to water quality.

In short, corn-based ethanol is harmful to plants, animals, people and other living things. Corn-based ethanol fails to accomplish any of its stated objectives and only survives due to collusion between government and the ethanol industry.

Fortunately, "sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant." Public criticism can successfully challenge the myths and falsehoods that animate U.S. energy policy.

On Dec. 31, several key ethanol subsidies will expire unless renewed by Congress. Journalist

Moira Herbst quips that a broad coalition of "ranchers and environmentalists, hog farmers and hippies, solar-power idealists and free-market pragmatists" are armed with powerful evidence and ready to fight the ethanol lobby.

And if, God forbid, they lose, I'm starting a "The Food Prices are Too Damn High" Party.