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For Gulf, Biofuels Are Worse Than Oil Spill

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Environment: Our growing addiction to alternative energy was killing aquatic life in the Gulf long before the Deepwater Horizon spill. Abandoning oil will kill more and also release more carbon dioxide into the air.

President Obama sees the oil spill as a chance to make the planet a greener place by weaning us off fossil fuels and pushing us toward alternative energy. The earth and the Gulf of Mexico have indeed been getting greener lately, thanks to agricultural runoff due to a mandated surge in biofuels such as ethanol.

Before the first gallon gushed from Deepwater Horizon, there existed an 8,500 square mile "dead zone" below the Mississippi River Delta, roughly the size of Connecticut and Delaware combined.

Hypoxia, or oxygen depletion, caused by agricultural runoff in the Mississippi River Basin varies from year to year, but it has been on an upward trend as acreage for corn destined to become ethanol increases.

As Steven Hayward reports in the Weekly Standard, a 2008 study by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) found that "nitrogen leaching from fertilized cornfields in the Mississippi-Atchafalaya River system is a primary cause of the bottom-water hypoxia that develops on the continental shelf of the northern Gulf of Mexico each summer."

Ethanol from corn sounds like an energy panacea, but the devil is in the details. It takes 4,000 gallons of fresh water per acre per day to replace evaporation in a cornfield. Each acre requires about 130 pounds of nitrogen and 55 pounds of phosphorous. That produces a lot of runoff. The NAS study concludes that current ethanol production goals will increase dissolved inorganic nitrogen flowing into the Gulf by as much as 34%.

The Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently stated in a report: "When acidification, fertilizer use, biodiversity loss and toxicity of agricultural pesticides are taken into account, the overall impact of ethanol and biodiesel can very easily exceed those of petrol and mineral diesel."

Vast swaths of rain forest in places like Malaysia and Indonesia have been cleared to provide farmland not to feed the hungry but to fuel our cars. The Nature Conservancy's Joseph Fargione estimates rain forest clear-cutting for biofuels releases 17 to 420 times more carbon dioxide than it offsets by replacing petroleum or coal.

As Indur M. Goklany of the Cato Institute reports, agricultural expansion leads to higher releases of carbon from biomass and soil above and below ground. Fertilizers that increase yields also increase nitrogen discharge into waters and emissions of nitrous oxide — a greenhouse gas that heats the atmosphere 300 times more effectively than carbon dioxide.

According to David Tilman, University of Minnesota ecologist and co-author of a study published earlier this year in the journal Science, converting the grasslands of the United States to corn for ethanol releases excess CO₂ emissions of 134 metric tons per hectare (equal to 2.47 acres).

"Any biofuel that causes land clearing is likely to increase global warming," says ecologist Fargione. Tim Searchinger, an agricultural expert at Princeton University, says, "There is a huge imbalance between the carbon (released) by plowing up a hectare of forest or grassland from the benefit you get from biofuels."

All of this may not be as visually exciting as a gushing oil well a mile below the Gulf, but it shows no form of energy is pain-free and the benefits and trade-offs of any form of energy must be judged on the basis of science and not ideology.

As the current administration and Congress are bent on a war on fossil fuels, perhaps a change in Congress and the White House is required to restore science to its rightful place.

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