



## Food and witches to burn

Pat Michaels

October 29, 2015

A few hundred years ago, in the depths of the Little Ice Age, crops failed and people starved. Cool summers slowed growth, growing seasons were generally short, and low soil temperatures kept everything wet, possibly promoting the growth of hallucinogenic ergot molds on small grains such as wheat.

In this miasmatic world, medieval authorities determined that witches were the cause of the bad weather. So they burned them.

You can question the logic. But is it any less goofy that – again because of the climate – burning food to make our cars run worse and use more gas?

That's what 100 percent ethyl alcohol made from corn, also known as ethanol, does. It has less energy than pure gas, so cars lose a mile or two per gallon burning the stuff. Hybrid cars that skimp on gas can lose much more because they tend to be underpowered to begin with. Burning 10 percent ethanol fuel, drivers have to mash the throttle to simply get them up to speed.

Ethanol consumes a lot of corn. The current Environmental Protection Agency "mandates" result in 44 percent – or nearly half of the corn that we use domestically – being diverted from food and feed to ethanol.

Ethanol does about as much for the climate of today as burning witches did about the Little Ice Age. A raft of recent science shows that it actually produces more carbon dioxide emissions in its life cycle than does burning pure gas.

Opposition to ethanol is wide and deep. The respected pollster Celinda Lake finds that 56 percent of self-identified Republicans and a plurality of Democrats and Independents don't like it. That's why organizations ranging from the American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers to the Union of Concerned Scientists and Friends of the Earth have all come out swinging against corn-based ethanol mandates.

So should anyone who cares about the world's poor. Sure, here in the USA, most of us spend only a tiny portion of our income on food. In the underdeveloped world, the percent of income that just goes to food subsistence can run up to 80 percent.

What we are doing has to raise food prices. We are the OPEC of corn, producing nearly 40 percent of the globe's supply. We are therefore burning up approximately 18 percent of the world's corn. Because of subsidies paid to ethanol producers, they can afford to pay top dollar to U.S. farmers, increasing the amount of land diverted from pasture or other crops, usually soybeans. That means other countries grow more beans, crowding out their corn land and further restricting the supply.

It's generally so lucrative to grow corn now that farmers plant from fencerow to fencerow. This wipes out the unplowed edges of fields that trap excess fertilizer before it can wash into the creek that eventually flows into the Gulf of Mexico, leaving a "dead zone" of overnutrified water for 6,500 square miles around the mouth of the Mississippi. In the East, ethanol contributes to the degradation of Chesapeake Bay, further imperiling its crab and oyster populations.

To reiterate: the ethanol mandate comes from the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Earlier this month, the (Republican) Senate Banking Committee turned *down* a bill to stop it by a 15-7 margin.

The silliness is boggling. In 2011, Stanford scientists calculated that global warming has reduced global crop yields by one or two percent. (For context, please note that global food production has doubled in the last 30 years). What this means is we are burning up more food than global warming takes away.

Sensible people would say that it is right to stop nonsense, but the farm lobby is powerful, and corn-fed Iowa – the ethanol capitol of America – will reject any politician who dares utter a word against its Washington welfare.

There is literally nothing good coming out of our ethanol binge. We are increasing world hunger, contributing more greenhouse gases, and – possibly most important of all – making our cars run yucky. There's no good argument for corn ethanol. It's witchcraft.

*Pat Michaels is director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.*