

From Farm to Fork to Fuel Pump, American Agriculture Answers the Call

Written by Sen Chuck Grassley
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by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

In the last half-century, U.S. farmers have answered the call to help feed, clothe and fuel a growing world population. In 1960, a U.S. farmer on average fed 25 people. Thanks to a blend of advances in mechanization, pest control, biotechnology, animal husbandry and veterinarian medicine – along with conscientious stewardship of soil, water and resource management -- each U.S. farmer today feeds more than 144 people.

Even as farmers respond to marketplace demands for affordable, abundant supplies of food, leaner cuts of meat and wholesome grains and produce, an ever widening disconnect exists between production and consumption. From grocery shoppers to public policy makers, fewer people share an appreciation for the supply chain that exists from the farm to fork, let alone from the farm to fuel pump.

That's right. The fuel pump. The farmers hitting the fields this spring are not only working to feed an expanding world population, they are helping to displace U.S. dependence on foreign petroleum. For decades, political instability in the Middle East has influenced U.S. public policy. Taxpayers support strategic military and foreign policy decisions to protect U.S. national, economic and energy security, stemming in part from our dependence on foreign petroleum.

The risks to U.S. economic growth also are growing, especially as developing heavyweights, such as China and India, increase their consumption of the world's finite fossil fuels.

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The simple truth is that the United States must take bold steps to sever foreign petroleum's stranglehold on America's economy and security. From my leadership position in the U.S. Senate, I have long championed public policy that would increase energy efficiency and conservation; support domestic energy production; and, develop alternative and renewable energy sources, including wind, biomass, hydroelectric, solar, geothermal and biofuels.

Consumers in the United States – who anticipate \$4 per gallon gasoline by the peak summer driving season – understand how important it is to diversify and expand access to reliable, affordable energy. The extra money spent at the pump, now averaging about \$3.56 per gallon for gasoline (I paid \$3.39/gallon in Cedar Falls this week), shrinks consumers' purchasing power. That's bad news in a U.S. economy driven by consumer spending. Higher fuel prices also drive up the costs for goods and services throughout the U.S. economy, making it harder for businesses to expand, increase wages and create new jobs.

Congress has supported public policy to encourage growth in homegrown biofuels, such as ethanol. A federal tax incentive, called Volumetric Ethanol Excise Tax Credit – or VEETC -- was created to get the domestic ethanol industry off the ground. It's paired with an import tariff to prevent foreign ethanol producers from taking advantage of the domestic tax break.

Critics of America's domestic biofuels industry, who spew anti-ethanol propaganda, are putting America's energy, economic and national security at risk. Not to mention thousands of U.S. jobs. When the biodiesel federal tax credit lapsed in 2009, nearly 23,000 jobs were wiped out. The U.S. ethanol industry supports nearly five times as many jobs.

Congress also created the Renewable Fuels Standard to get more biofuels at the pump. In 2010, nearly 90 percent of all gasoline sold in the U.S. contained ethanol. And the 13 billion gallons of homegrown ethanol reduced oil imports by 445 million barrels of oil.

Despite the long-term good investments clean-burning ethanol brings to the American public, from reducing dependence on foreign oil; creating jobs; protecting national security interests; helping the environment; and, diversifying U.S. fuel supplies, critics are still bad-mouthing ethanol.

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In recent years, Big Oil has teamed up with Big Food Manufacturers to spread bad publicity about ethanol. They'd like to make ethanol a scapegoat for bigger grocery bills and higher prices at the pump. It's rather incredulous to consider they are playing into the hands of the likes of Hugo Chavez and Moammar Kadafi.

America's farmers understand that corn-based ethanol is better than dirty fossil fuels any day of the week. Would the taxpaying public rather support energy policies that support American agriculture's efforts to increase U.S. energy independence, or would taxpayers rather support policies that maintain the stranglehold of foreign petroleum?

In the United States Senate, I will continue my crusade in Washington to champion homegrown biofuels. Corn-based ethanol is just the beginning to even more biofuels breakthroughs. Just consider the first generation of ethanol, made from corn, has made possible the development of biofuels from cellulosic materials such as switch grass, corn stover and wood waste.

Rolling back the clock on the amazing contributions American agriculture has made to U.S. energy independence, a cleaner environment and national security would be a tragic mistake.

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