

Assault on Ethanol Misses Its Mark

Written by Sen. Charles Grassley
Friday, 15 November 2013 15:03

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by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

As its market share dips, Big Oil is doubling down to swat down its perennial piñata. This time around, petroleum producers and food conglomerates are using environmental groups as political cover to gain traction on efforts to pull the plug on the Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS).

Despite the ridiculously transparent and self-serving assault by these special interest groups, the relentless campaign to discredit ethanol undermines America's longstanding efforts to diversify its energy landscape, fuel the economy and strengthen national security.

The predictable efforts to smear ethanol's reputation ignore the renewable fuel's valuable contributions to clean energy, rural development, job creation and U.S. energy independence. The latest round of misguided untruths disregards the plain truth. Ethanol is a renewable, sustainable, clean-burning fuel that helps run the nation's transportation fleet with less pollution. Yet, critics continue to hide behind distortions that claim ethanol is bad for the environment.

Let's talk turkey and separate fact from fiction regarding ethanol's impact on the environment.

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Critics say farmers are putting fragile land into production to cash in on higher corn prices at the expense of soil erosion and clean water. They point out that five million Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres are no longer enrolled in the conservation program since 2008. They want to pin the blame on ethanol.

First of all, fewer acres enrolled in the CRP has more to do with federal belt tightening than land stewardship decisions by America's corn farmers. The 2008 farm bill built upon other stewardship incentives for America's farmers and ranchers administered by the USDA, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, wetlands restoration and wildlife habitat programs. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), no new grassland has been converted to cropland since 2005.

Fact: The Wetlands Reserve Program in 2012 had a record-breaking enrollment of 2.65 million acres. WRP lands cannot be farmed for 30 years.

Farmers must make marketing, planting and stewardship decisions that keep their operation financially sound and productive from crop year to crop year. Even more importantly, these decisions must be environmentally sustainable for the long haul. Let's be clear. Farmers simply can't afford not to take scrupulous care of the land that sustains their livelihoods.

Fact: Fertilizer use is on the decline. Compare application per bushel in 1980 versus 2010 – nitrogen is down 43 percent; phosphate is down 58 percent; and, potash is down 64 percent.

Fact: Ethanol burns cleaner than gasoline. According to the Argonne National Laboratory, corn ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 34 percent compared to gasoline. If the oil industry wants to talk about the environment, let's not forget the 1989 Exxon Valdez and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spills.

Critics also say the RFS is driving more acres into corn production. In reality, the RFS is driving significant investment in higher-yielding, drought-resistant seed technology. This is a win-win scenario to cultivate good-paying jobs and to harvest better yields on less land.

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Fact: The total cropland planted to corn in the United States is decreasing. In 2013, U.S. farmers planted 97 million corn acres. In the 1930s, farmers planted 103 million acres of corn. Farmers have increased the corn harvest through higher yields, not more acres.

Critics contend the nation's corn crop is diverted for fuel use at the expense of feed for livestock and higher prices at the grocery store.

Fact: In reality, the value of corn increases during ethanol production. One-third of the corn processed to make ethanol re-enters the marketplace as high value animal feed called dried distillers grain. Livestock feed remains the largest end-user of corn. When co-products such as dried distillers grains are factored in, ethanol consumes only 27 percent of the whole corn crop by volume; livestock feed uses 50 percent of the crop.

Fact: The USDA Secretary has said farmers receive about 14 cents of every food dollar spent at the grocery store. And, the farmer's share of a \$4 box of corn flakes is about 10 cents.

So what's at stake when a coalition of special interests tag teams to pull the rug out from underneath the nation's ethanol policy?

Unfortunately, these flawed attacks on ethanol and next-generation biofuels undermine America's effort to move forward with an aggressive, diversified energy policy that takes into account global demand, geopolitics and U.S. economic growth.

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