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Ethanol NOT the Answer

By Sarah Tarver-Wahlquist and Tracy Fernandez Rysavy

While corn-based ethanol has been touted as a way to solve the climate crisis, it simply isn't a major improvement over gasoline when it comes to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.

About 95 percent of U.S. ethanol is derived from corn kernels. Because corn is such an energy-intensive plant to grow, and because the methods to process corn into ethanol are also energy intensive, it takes seven barrels of oil to produce eight barrels of corn ethanol, from field to processing plant. Research published in *BioScience* in 2005 found that "the environmental impacts far exceed any value in developing this energy resource on a large scale." When you factor in production, ethanol curbs climate-changing vehicle emissions by a mere 12 percent over gasoline, according to a 2006 University of Minnesota study.

For greenhouse gas reduction ethanol compares poorly to other biofuels such as biodiesel, which cuts emissions by 41 percent over diesel (51 percent over gasoline), figures which include the energy required to grow soybeans. While not an ideal fuel source, soybeans can be grown with much less energy and far fewer chemicals than corn.

One of ethanol's main selling points is that it will heighten U.S. security by reducing our dependence on oil imports from countries potentially harboring terrorists. But the fact is, growing that much corn for ethanol would make impossible demands on our agricultural land.

The USDA estimates that 90.5 million acres of corn will be planted in 2007 (up 12 million from 2006), but even if all of this corn were used for ethanol, it would only satisfy about 16 percent of our annual fuel needs. Any attempt to replace the 200 billion gallons of fuel used by U.S. drivers each year with corn ethanol would require that 675 million additional acres, or 71 percent of America's current farmland, be used to grow corn, according to *Popular Mechanics*.

Experts are sounding the alarm that boosting corn ethanol production could pose a grave danger to the world's food supply. Remember, corn isn't just the corn-on-the-cob or canned corn we pick up at the market. It gets turned into animal feed to provide beef and dairy products. It's in nearly every processed food in the form of high-fructose corn syrup, as well as corn-based foods like tortillas.

The price of yellow corn on the world market has already hit a ten-year high, in part due to ethanol's rising popularity, says the BBC.

Consider the domino effect. Corn prices are tied to other grain prices, so as the cost of corn rises, world grain prices will likely follow suit. While US consumers, particularly

low-income families, will see significant hikes in food prices, the world's poor, who rely heavily on imported grain, will be hit the hardest.

Growing corn at the scale required to switch a significant amount of fuel in the US to ethanol could have devastating environmental effects. Corn requires more toxic pesticides and fertilizers than any other U.S. food crops.

Ethanol proponents argue that higher corn prices are good for small-scale farmers. Indeed, the price of corn rose 55 percent in 2005 alone. But there's more to the story than that statistic reveals.

When corn prices rise, animal feed prices for dairy and meat farmers rise along with it. So far this year, these U.S. farmers have been hit hard by a 25 percent rise in feed costs.

And though corn farmers are being paid more for their harvest, they don't stand to profit as much as those who turn that corn into ethanol, and processing plants are being increasingly consolidated into the hands of agribusiness giants like ADM.

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