

Exposing the corn-based Ethanol hoax as a solution to peak oil

Corn lobby's tall tale of a gas substitute

Americans are excited about the possibility that Ethanol, which in the U.S. is derived from corn, will solve the gasoline problem because it is a renewable fuel and does not contribute to greenhouse gases. President Bush predicts ethanol will replace gasoline, and Congress has mandated nearly doubling its production.

"But so far, ethanol is more politics than promise."

Over the next five years, \$5.7 billion in federal tax credits will be a boon to the ethanol market and make Midwest corn growers very happy. Supporters of ethanol say it will help to cure America's addiction to fossil fuels.

But there are serious concerns that show ethanol may not be the energy efficient solution many are hoping for: the net energy gain from corn-based ethanol is modest - the libertarian Cato Institute says it takes the equivalent of seven barrels of oil to produce eight barrels of corn-derived ethanol. Argonne National Laboratory, which studies ethanol for the Department of Energy, is more generous: for each unit of energy to grow, process, and transport corn ethanol, it yields 1.35 units of energy.

It gets significantly lower miles per gallon than gasoline and is more expensive. How will this help Americans at the pump when this fuel will necessitate more frequent fill-ups?

The Sierra Club says, although it will reduce carbon emissions, it is actually worse than gasoline in making smog. On top of that, builders of the nearly 200 ethanol manufacturing facilities under construction or planned may power their facilities with coal because it is less expensive than natural gas. This would wipe out or reduce any greenhouse gains of ethanol.

There are other ways. In Brazil, where ethanol is made from sugar, the plants are powered by cane-stalk residue. This makes for a cleaner process but uses up enormous amounts of land acreage (no small consideration if the US greatly ramps up production).

Another alternative for America instead of sugar which may not grow as well as it does in Brazil's tropics, is energy-efficient cellulose which comes from agriculture and forestry products. Prairie switch grass is another possibility touted by President Bush, but that is years away.

Despite the downsides of corn based ethanol, America is focusing on a big increase in production and is shutting out competition by imposing high tariffs. This keeps US ethanol prices high and protects the industry from competition with more energy efficient varieties. Arizona Republican Congressman John Shadegg is rightly bucking the US ethanol lobby by proposing a temporary suspension of these tariffs.

Ethanol does hold some promise for the United States but not if political distortions support only the corn based version.