

Corn hole

Opposition to ethanol growing



BY **CURT GUYETTE**

As Michigan rushes ahead to build new plants that will turn corn into fuel for our cars, trucks and SUVs, an unusual assortment of opponents is trying to douse what critics call a "frenzy" for this alternative to gasoline.

It's a national trend, and Michigan is part of it. As the *Detroit News* recently reported, Michigan had a single biofuel plant two years ago; now there are six ethanol and biodiesel facilities in operation and another 16 on the drawing board.

Part of the controversy revolves around how the debate is being framed, which largely focuses on the issue of ethanol versus gasoline. On one side you have such scientists as professor Bruce Dale, associate director of Michigan State University's Office of Bio-based Technologies.

Along with a number of other scientists, Dale is joined by corn farmers, big agribusiness such as the politically influential Archer Daniels Midland Company, and a lot of politicians who maintain that ethanol is a smart way to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. From President George W. Bush to Michigan's Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Sen. Carl Levin, the biofuel is touted as a fuel of the future. As Levin said just last month, he's "more convinced than ever that investing in ethanol is critical for our national security, our environment and for Michigan's economy."

And with the road to the White House leading through corn-rich Iowa, which traditionally plays an early role in helping decide the nominees for both major parties, ethanol has much support among the current crop of candidates. Even senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and John McCain, who, as *Rolling Stone* reported, were previously skeptical of heavy ethanol subsidies, are now singing a different tune.

On the other side is an increasingly loud chorus of opponents. Groups that usually occupy opposite sides of the political divide now find themselves oddly united in criticizing the push to promote corn as fuel. *Business Week* magazine earlier this year described the opposition this way: "The effort is uniting ranchers and environmentalists, hog farmers and hippies, solar-power idealists and free-market pragmatists."

What's going on?

For one thing, as the effort to produce ethanol ramps up, the economic impact of using food to create fuel is being increasingly felt. Last month, *Rolling Stone*, in an article highly critical of the push for ethanol reported that "ethanol production represents only 3.5 percent of our gasoline consumption — yet consumes 20 percent of the entire U.S. corn crop, causing the price of corn to double in the last two years and raising the threat of hunger in the Third World." Earlier this year, *The Washington Post* reported "Mexico is in the grip of the worst tortilla crisis in its modern history. Dramatically rising international corn prices, spurred by demand for the grain-based fuel ethanol, have led to expensive tortillas."

When I point that fact out to people, some of them tend to laugh, as if the shortage of a food staple in another country is a kind of joke since it's not happening here. But the laugh's also on us. Another *Washington Post* article from around the same time reported: "A soaring demand for corn used to produce ethanol has hog farmers bracing for higher feed prices that threaten to put some producers out of business." When pig farmers are squealing about their increased costs, consumers are bound to feel the pinch in their pocketbooks.

It's a pinch that's only going to continue to be felt more sharply. In its 2005 energy bill, Congress inserted a renewable fuel standard that, according to the National Taxpayers Union, effectively mandated the use of 7.5 billion gallons of ethanol per year by 2012 — up from the 5 billion to 6 billion gallons expected to be produced this year.

All that comes at a cost to you, both as a taxpayer and a consumer. On the tax side, ethanol is supported by significant subsidies that include a 51-cents-per-gallon tax allowance for refiners. If all the corn and ethanol subsidies are added up, contends the International Institute for Sustainable Development, taxpayer support is almost \$1.40 per gallon.

As it is now, the amount of ethanol blended with gasoline is 10 percent. But efforts are under way to push E85, which is 85 percent ethanol and 15 percent gasoline, and requires specially designed flexible fuel vehicles. The problem for consumers is that a gallon of ethanol has about one-third less energy than a gallon of gasoline, pushing up the cost.

There are other factors that concern many environmentalists. One is that corn's considered to be a "prima donna" crop requiring significantly greater amounts of both fertilizer and water than other food crops such as soybeans.

Because ethanol absorbs water, it cannot be pumped through pipelines as gasoline is, but rather has to be shipped via trucks, trains and barges, further increasing the energy needed to bring it to market.

There is hot debate in the scientific community regarding how much energy goes into producing ethanol versus the amount the finished product delivers. The majority holds that there's a slight net increase, but there are high-profile detractors who argue that there's actually an energy loss of as much as nearly 30 percent.

And then there's the matter of water consumption. At least three gallons of water, and in some cases even more, are required to produce a single gallon of ethanol.

For his part, MSU's Bruce Dale, who has devoted his career to developing renewable sources of energy, says many of ethanol's critics are missing the point. When you compare it to the environmental degradation caused by the exploration, refining, transportation and burning of oil to fuel cars, there's no doubt that the investment in ethanol is a good one.

But part of what drives environmentalists such as East Lansing's Alex Sagady mad is that, because of the power of special interests, the real issue is largely being lost. An environmental consultant who also runs the Enviromich list serve, Sagady argues that instead of pouring billions into developing ethanol, a far better investment could be made by heavily subsidizing and mandating higher energy efficiency and conservation measures.

"Renewable energy doesn't necessarily mean green energy, it doesn't necessarily mean a reduction in greenhouse gasses," he says. Highly efficient furnaces and home appliances, increased public support of mass transit, a mandate forcing automakers to produce fleets that average 35 miles per gallon, increased building standards, changing the patterns of land use so that commutes are shortened, massive investment in truly clean energies such as solar and wind — these are the solutions that need to be promoted if we want real, sustainable energy independence.

The problem, he says, is that powerful special interests are calling the shots. "We don't have a strong lobby for renewable and sustainable energy. "The lobby for nonsustainable approaches is pretty big, and the lobby for sustainable energy and energy efficiency is small."

Curt Guyette is *Metro Times* news editor. Contact him at 313-202-8004 or cguyette@metrotimes.com.