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Sobering Up: The Case for Ending the Ethanol Mandate

Ever wondered why every gas station has a little sign or sticker at the pumps that says their fuel contains 10% ethanol? It’s simple: Federal law mandates it. Federal “renewable fuel standards” (RFS) require that a certain amount of ethanol (alcohol made from distilling agricultural products, mostly corn) must be mixed into the nation’s gasoline supply every year. There even used to be a federal ethanol subsidy, much beloved by Midwestern corn farmers, but Congress finally ended it a few years ago. But the RFS lives on and creates the same effects: artificially boosting corn production and ethanol usage.

The original purpose of the mandate and subsidies were to promote “energy independence,” since the US heartland produces a great surplus of corn but imports oil from unstable and unsavory countries. And political support solidified when corn-producing states and their Congressmen discovered the boom in ethanol production facilities that followed.

Despite its support in Washington, the RFS ethanol mandate, Affirmatives will argue, is bad in multiple ways. First, ethanol is more expensive (per unit of energy delivered) than gasoline, so inevitably gasoline prices on average must go up to cover the added cost. [Don’t be fooled by E85 fuel, 85% ethanol + 15% gasoline, being cheaper than regular gasoline. Ethanol has significantly lower energy content, such that a gallon of ethanol would not move your car as far as a gallon of gasoline.]

And while many believed that ethanol would be better for the environment, it turns out after further study that it isn’t. The EPA’s own study admits that ethanol fueled air pollution will cause additional mortality in the US population that would not have occurred with gasoline alone. Not to mention the lives threatened by hunger and higher food prices, which naturally follow when food is taken off the market and put into the gas tanks of cars.

The federally mandated increase in US corn production also puts increased pressure on the farm states to produce more corn at any cost. And the cost is great: All of that excess fertilizer ends up washing off from farms and into the Mississippi River, exiting southern Louisiana at the Gulf of Mexico, and its effects on the Gulf are devastating. A massive “dead zone” occurs every year at the mouth of the Mississippi where the chemicals wash in and create ocean conditions deadly to fish.

Negatives will argue that the doom and gloom scenario of ethanol is a myth. Studies have found no significant impact on food prices. Others have quantified big economic benefits to the farm states from the ethanol boom. Minor repairs could easily solve for any remaining harms and allow the RFS to usher us into a golden age of “cellulosic ethanol,” which would solve all the problems. And that so-called “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico is actually teeming with fish. Nutrients provided by agricultural runoff have proven beneficial to similar zones around the world.

In Sickness and in Health: The Case for Restricting Farm Antibiotics

Dr. Michael J. Martin, Dr. Sapna E. Thottathil and Dr. Thomas B. Newman in the American Journal of Public Health, December 2015, repeated an urgent warning, when they said: “Recently, the World Health Organization called antimicrobial resistance ‘an increasingly serious threat to global public health that requires action across all government sectors and society.’ ”

The widespread use and abuse of antibiotics on farms is a key component of this urgent threat because excess use of antibiotics on farm animals creates drug-resistant bacteria that can spread to humans and create life-threatening disease. When the day comes that resistant bacteria become widespread, medical care will revert to the Dark Ages, since so many of the diseases we thought were conquered long ago will come back with a vengeance.

Farmers routinely dose all their healthy animals with antibiotics in order to counteract the filthy conditions in which they are raised, and because they tend to grow larger and fatter faster when so treated. Antibiotic usage on healthy animals is so widespread that probably 70% of all the antibiotics sold in the US today are sold on farms, rather than to sick human beings. The natural course of biology dictates that over time, though most are killed, the surviving bacteria stick around, reproduce, and develop into a new antibiotic-resistant strain. The solution is H.R.1552 - Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act of 2015, or “PAMTA.”

PAMTA was written by a Congresswoman from New York state who also happens to be a qualified expert in microbiology (you might point that out when citing her comments on her own bill). PAMTA requires veterinary supervision of antibiotic usage on farms and bans routine antibiotics for healthy animals, while preserving their usage only for the sick ones. A similar policy has been tried in Denmark with great success.

Negatives will argue that the Status Quo already has some new guidelines put out by the FDA that are good enough to solve the problem. And it’s not really much of a problem, since most of the current antibiotics are being used responsibly and there’s little or no risk of transmission of resistant disease to humans. In addition, the Denmark case needs further investigation because it had a number of problems the Affirmative didn’t mention. You may reduce antibiotics for a while, but then you get more sick animals. So what do you do then? That’s right, a massive infusion of antibiotics.

Dust in the Wind: The Case for Ending Water Subsidies

Peter Culp and Robert Glennon said it best in the Wall Street Journal in October 2012: “In 2012, the drought-stricken Western United States will ship more than 50 billion gallons of water to China. This water will leave the country embedded in alfalfa—most of it grown in California—and is destined to feed Chinese cows. The strange situation illustrates what is wrong about how we think, or rather don't think, about water policy in the U.S.”

You’ve probably seen or heard on the news the stories about the terrible drought conditions in California and other Western states. It’s often a battle between farmers, who need water for irrigation, and city-dwellers, who need water for everyday survival. But most people have never stopped to ask the question: Why is anyone trying to grow crops in the middle of desert areas like the Central Valley of California in the first place? Why try to grow cotton (a very thirsty water-intensive crop) in the middle of the Arizona desert?

The short answer is, because federal subsidies and projects have brought in water at below-market prices and made it artificially economically feasible to do so. Absent those subsidies, farming of water-intensive crops would naturally gravitate back to places where water is naturally available. It would be an all around benefit to the environment and to the wallets of the American taxpayers.

This case also deals with EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program), a federal subsidy encouraging the purchase of more water-efficient irrigation equipment. Instead of promoting conservation, it has backfired and actually increased water usage and groundwater depletion. When you use subsidized water more efficiently, it doesn’t motivate you to use less of it, it motivates you to increase the acreage you are irrigating, since you can irrigate more for the same price.

Negatives will argue that the reason farms consume so much water is that people like to eat. Blaming farmers for water shortages is a dangerous exercise in finding a villain when we should instead be looking for real solutions.

Most water isn’t subsidized today and there are already programs and policies in place today that can solve. Massive economic losses will follow from the plan and it will only distract us from finding real solutions.