



the GREAT corn debate

Simultaneously touted as a miracle fuel and an overrated scam, the corn-based ethanol debate is complicated. To add clarity to the discussion, *Envi* spoke to two people on opposite sides of the issue. **Ann Peck**, former executive secretary of the New York Corn Growers Association, supports corn-based ethanol. **David Pimentel**, of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University, concluded that corn-based ethanol is not a viable fuel alternative.

Advocate: Ann Peck



Envi: How has the demand for ethanol affected the industry?

Peck: The increase in price and the demand for ethanol has increased the demand for corn. It has allowed growers to stay in business and catch up with their back bills and maybe make some progress financially. It's also encouraged farmers,

because of the ethanol demand, to plant acres of corn that they might not have planted otherwise.

On what science are you concluding that ethanol is an effective fuel alternative?

[Studies] by different universities: Michigan State, Cornell, Iowa State, other universities, the USDA, EIA — the energy division of USDA in the government — all that has been based on the studies that have been done by them. Studies done by outside consultants like LEGG, the LLC, all kinds of studies.

A scientist over at Cornell is opposed to corn-based ethanol because of his own research.

If asked, somebody like professor Margaret Smith or a lot of other professors would say that Mr. Pimentel doesn't know what he's talking about. He's an entomologist. He's a bug guy and not a corn researcher. A lot of his research is based on 25-year-old data. He assumes that every acre of corn in this country is irrigated. He doesn't even use the Fertilizer Institute figures, and he includes the energy from the fact that the farmer has to climb on the tractor. That farmer's going to climb on the tractor whether he grows corn, soybean, wheat, alfalfa, or whatever. His study is really flawed.

Opponent: David Pimentel



Envi: Are your research and findings generally accepted as sound science?

Pimentel: In 1980, the Secretary of Energy asked me to chair a study on ethanol. We produced a report that was reviewed by 26 top scientists and engineers in the United States, and they were

unanimous that it was sound. The Secretary of Energy released the report, and two congressmen from the cornbelt didn't like it, so they had this investigated by the Government Accounting Office. GAO spent 20 times more money investigating the report and committee than we spent producing the report. GAO did a very thorough job and concluded that ours was sound.

What are your findings on corn-based ethanol?

Using Department of Energy data, last year 20 percent of U.S. corn went to produce ethanol and provided us with five billion gallons of ethanol. What does that mean to total petroleum use in the U.S.? Less than one percent. Is this making us oil-independent? No. We're importing oil from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere for ethanol.

Is corn-based ethanol a worse option than gasoline as it stands now?

I'd be for ethanol if it were providing us with an alternative fuel. But we're taking 43 percent [more] from fossil energy to produce a gallon of ethanol than you get out. The only thing that's driving this is the subsidies — big subsidies. Otherwise this thing would go dead. The same goes for the Brazilian ethanol. They are subsidizing that one, also. But I will say sugarcane is better than corn.

« VIRGINIA NUSSEY »

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