



April 1, 2008

VIA FAX

To the editor:

Your article on biofuels ("The Clean Energy Myth," April 7 issue), would have been more balanced and less inflammatory had you taken a broader view of ethanol's place in the energy environment, and not spent so much time citing discredited research. Please allow me to tackle two of your assertions in the article. Unfortunately, space prohibits me from getting into the question of Lester Brown, whose alarmism and threats of famine have been solidly debunked before, and who should not have any place in a thoughtful essay on food and biofuels.

In your effort to stop the deforestation of the Amazon, much of which is the fault of illegal timber operators, you quote some recent research on land-use impacts of the growing popularity of ethanol. This research, by David Tilman and Tim Searchinger, has been called into question by a number of scientists from such institutions as Michigan State University, the University of Nebraska and the Argonne National Laboratory, who have called the research "highly speculative," "not directly relevant," and using "unlikely scenarios." To suggest, for example, that every incremental acre of corn used for ethanol in the United States will induce cultivation of an acre of some other crop somewhere else in the world is a gross oversimplification of the issue. Interestingly, Peter Zurbier, a researcher in Brazil who organized a global conference to discuss issues around land use and the impact of biofuels, sees things differently than your reporter's questionable sources. Deforestation leads to soybean production near the Amazon, Zurbier says, not the other way around.

Second, it is ludicrous to blame corn ethanol for higher food prices. The portion that farmers receive is only a small part of the overall processed food bill – less than 20 percent. USDA economist Ephraim Leibtag demonstrates that higher corn prices pass through to retail prices at a rate less than 10 percent of the corn price change. Given that foods using corn as an ingredient make up less than a third of retail food spending, he says, overall retail food prices would rise less than one percentage point per year above the normal rate of food price inflation when corn prices increase by 50 percent. And even this increase may be partially tempered by changes to corn use in food production, Leibtag reports.

Our bottom line as proud U.S. corn growers is simple: Corn ethanol is not only good for farmers, but good for the economy and the environment as a key part of a broader, more diversified solution to energy independence and security. And we are getting more efficient and more sustainable each season in corn and ethanol production.

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