

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

'Gasohol is dangerous folly'

Like other biomass options, it degrades high-level fuel. Put the moonshine in the farmer, not the tank.

Mr. Engdahl is visiting his native state of Texas this week. He requested that we reprint a section of the new 30-page pamphlet, "Keeping Food on America's Table," published by Citizens for LaRouche. This column comes from the pamphlet's transcript of Contributing Editor Lyndon LaRouche's June 14 discussion in Chicago with 50 national and regional U.S. farm leaders representing every important sector of American agribusiness.

Q: Where do you stand on the production of fuel alcohol?

A: The oil swindle has created the problem. If the farmer wants to convert some waste he has into alcohol on his back lot to beat the oil companies, that's all right. But when you start growing food to convert it to fuel alcohol you have started down the path of disaster.

The crazy Carter administration has deliberately helped force this program to convert grain into automobile fuel. Consider the amount of fuel which would be required, the number of BTUs, to fuel America's cars and trucks. Think of how many acres of product you would have to have to produce fuel alcohol enough to make a dent in this requirement. Compare that with a hungry world. The pressure is on the farmer to go with the grain alcohol scheme because the farmer can't sell his product. He's hoping for another market allocation to make a little more money. But when you look at it from the standpoint

of science and engineering, it is a swindle.

The farmer can see salvaging waste to get something which otherwise would be of no value and substituting that for buying diesel oil or gasoline as an economical proposition. But when you extend that and say let's produce synthetic alcohol for the whole population, that's bad. All you have to do is look at the energy throughput figures on this. Remember, how many acres are you going to destroy?

Solar energy presents the same problem. The value of solar energy contained in food is that it is energy organized in a form useful for animal and human consumption. That is the specific value of that form of energy. When you convert that form of energy into inorganic energy you have degraded it and you have made a crucial loss.

Q: I don't agree. When you convert grain into fuel, there is a byproduct that can be fed to livestock.

A: That's exactly what I'm talking about. When you put the moonshine in the farmer it works out fine.

Imagine the amount of energy coming onto an acre of land, and take the conversion of sunlight into biomass. The conversion of sunlight actually hitting the surface into biomass is at best 2 to 10 percent, and the optimal conversion environment is a saltwater marsh. The best above that is a forest, then a field comes next. So you have less than 2 percent of a very tiny energy

flux density of sunlight hitting the earth. The energy flux density of the sunlight hitting the earth in the first place is about one five thousandth of burning coal or gasoline. Of that, the calories you're taking out of the starches in the corn to make alcohol, are only part of the energy, but all of that energy comes from a very restricted source. Therefore, what you are doing whenever you use biomass as a source of energy, is engaging in the most inefficient imaginable kind of inorganic energy cycle for an economy.

The crucial example of why it would be lunatic to go to gasohol or why it would be lunatic to go with any biomass program, why it would be lunatic to tolerate a solar energy program is given to us already in the case of Brazil. Everybody in North American agriculture, particularly in the Northwestern states, has been facing this error. More than 100,000 square miles of Brazilian rainforest were cut down, under pressure from the World Bank and the United States. They told the Brazilians not to burn coal to make steel, not to burn gasoline.

The effect of deforesting 100,000 square miles of land, particularly rain forests, was to change the world's weather.

If we go ahead with a gasohol program in the United States, not only will we be wasting money, we will drive the economy back toward the Stone Age, we will destroy the American weather system, and we will turn this continent into a desert. So at that kind of a price—and since we don't need any of this gasohol in the first place—why do something that insane and inefficient?