

**CROPS**

# 12 myths and realities of food vs. fuel debate

## Opinion

**N**OT everyone sees the emerging biofuels industry as a boon. Thomas Elam, a longtime poultry industry consultant and expert on feed and food policy, has a different view. The president of FarmEcon.com, Carmel, Ind., shares his dozen myths about the biofuels movement:

- Myth #1:** Food-based ethanol is a renewable fuel.  
**Reality:** On the contrary, food-based ethanol production and distribution burns about two-thirds of a British thermal unit of fossil fuel for every Btu of energy produced.
- Myth #2:** Food-based biofuels can replace a meaningful proportion of the world's fossil-fuel supply.  
**Reality:** Converting 20% of the world's 2007 grain crop to ethanol would produce about 138 million tons of ethanol (with a net gain of 45 million tons, given the fossil fuel required to produce it). That's only 0.45% of the world's crude-oil production.
- Myth #3:** Food-based fuels can be made from surplus ag commodities.  
**Reality:** All major crops are already at historically high price levels. No surplus of food or good land can be used for food-based fuel production without affecting food prices.
- Myth #4:** Food-based ethanol production significantly reduces greenhouse-gas emissions.  
**Reality:** Recent Swiss research reports that corn-based ethanol production systems emit only 10% less greenhouse gases than are produced by burning low-sulfur gasoline.
- Myth #5:** Food-based biofuel is an environmentally friendly product.  
**Reality:** The Swiss study claims U.S. corn-based ethanol has more than 150% more total environmental impact than gasoline. Potential exists for widespread ecological damage from the conversion of land to "fuel farms."
- Myth #6:** U.S. energy policy has a goal of increasing U.S. use of food-based biofuels.  
**Reality:** Partially true. While large federal subsidies encourage biofuels production, high ethanol import duties prevent tapping of global markets.
- Myth #7:** Subsidies for production of food-based biofuels create value-added products for the U.S. economy.  
**Reality:** The current subsidy system has the effect of taking food away from one potential user (the food producer) and selling it to a different user (the fuel producer) at a lower price. This destroys value instead of adding it.
- Myth #8:** Cellulose and waste-product-based ethanol can supply a meaningful proportion of the world's future energy demand.  
**Reality:** Only about 25% of crop residues can be harvested without detrimental effects on soil quality. Biomass from forests is limited by tree growth rates and competing uses for wood.
- Myth #9:** Food-based biofuels are cost-effective replacements for fossil fuels.  
**Reality:** Factoring in all costs, including subsidies and effects on food prices, food-based biofuels are much more expensive to produce.
- Myth #10:** We can easily increase crop yields fast enough to have enough food and produce more energy, too.  
**Reality:** Corn yield increases have been steady since the introduction of hybrids. Even at 340 bushels per acre (average is now 155 bushels), we'd still only replace on a net-energy basis about 8.25% of U.S. gasoline supply.
- Myth #11:** U.S. ethanol industry is moving away from food-based feedstocks.

**Reality:** Every plant currently under construction uses either corn or a corn-milo combination. The 85 plants will double the amount of U.S. food used for ethanol production by 2009.

**Myth #12:** The solution to higher-cost energy is to produce more energy, including food-based energy.

**Reality:** We need renewable energy sources that don't rely on fossil fuel: wind, solar, geothermal, hydroelectric and nuclear. The long-term answer is not to burn

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## National Corn Growers' president responds

By **RON LITTERER**



**A**NY review of ethanol myths and facts must look at the whole picture. It is ironic that this view comes when [ethanol] proponents were just recently accused by a United Nations official of committing "crimes against humanity" and having an "absolutely catastrophic" effect on world hunger.

Ethanol invokes a lot of emotions in those threatened by it. Some livestock organizations don't like the increased feed costs.

Big Oil sees a threat to market share. Environmental extremists see an opportunity to latch onto a manufactured crisis and win contributions.

No one holds that ethanol is a cure-all for what ails a world so dependent on the internal combustion engine. But certain facts must be made perfectly clear.

Food-based ethanol is renewable and energy-positive. Its production results in more energy than it consumes. Its base crops are regrown each season in an increasingly efficient manner.

Ethanol is greener and more sustainable than petroleum-based fuel. The Argonne National Laboratory has demonstrated that using ethanol produces 32% fewer greenhouse-gas emissions than gasoline for the same distance traveled.

In 2006, ethanol use in the U.S. reduced carbon-dioxide-equivalent greenhouse-gas emissions by approximately 8 million tons. That equals removing the annual emissions of more than 1.21 million cars from the road. Whether you believe in global warming or not, this is good news.

Producing ethanol doesn't take food away from starving Third World children, as U.N. officials claim. Corn used for ethanol is field corn typically used to feed livestock.

Ethanol production produces distillers grains and gluten feed. Both are fed to livestock, helping to produce high-quality meat products.

There is no shortage of corn. In fact, there's still room to significantly grow the ethanol market without limiting corn availability. Steadily increasing average corn yields and the improved ability of other nations to grow corn also make it clear that ethanol production can continue to grow without affecting food supplies.

Every year, ethanol technology gets better and better. And new frontiers are explored, such as cellulosic ethanol.

We agree with the Consumer Federation of America's research conclusion: "Supporting increased competition in the automobile fuels market will help discipline a market dominated by a handful of multinational oil companies that are extracting monopoly profits from U.S. gasoline consumers."

We are proud to take sides with the American farmer and the American consumer for the good of our economy and our environment. For more on this subject, visit [www.ethanolfacts.com](http://www.ethanolfacts.com).

Litterer is a farmer from Greene, Iowa, and is president of the National Corn Growers Association.

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