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EDITORIAL

Honesty About Ethanol

One of the 2007 energy bill's most ambitious provisions — the ethanol mandate — has turned out to be its most troublesome. The provision would boost ethanol production from 7-plus billion gallons today to 36 billion gallons by 2022. In practical terms, this means doubling the production of corn ethanol until advanced forms of ethanol and other biofuels kick in.

Corn ethanol came under fire earlier this year when evidence mounted that the diversion of cropland from food to fuel had contributed to the spike in worldwide food prices. What is less clear is whether corn ethanol is good or bad for the planet — whether it emits fewer or more greenhouse gas emissions than conventional gasoline. The answer turns on how you measure emissions.

Congress stipulated that ethanol be cleaner than gasoline and handed the job of measuring emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency, which has found itself under ferocious pressure. The ethanol industry wants its product shown in the best possible light. Environmentalists want an honest accounting, which the public deserves but which they do not think an industry-friendly Bush administration is capable of.

The most contentious question involves the emissions caused by direct and indirect changes in land use associated with growing biofuels. Until late last year, corn ethanol had been seen as at least carbon neutral — and thus much cleaner than gasoline — because the greenhouse gases it absorbed while growing canceled out the gases it emitted during combustion. This made it a win-win fuel — even a win-win-win fuel — because it also encouraged the construction of ethanol refineries in the American heartland and eased, to some extent, America's dependence on imported oil.

But then came a spate of new studies arguing that earlier calculations had failed to account for the emissions caused when land is cleared and tilled, releasing large quantities of stored carbon. In particular, the studies said, the earlier scenarios had overlooked the indirect or ripple effects of ethanol production — the carbon released when the diversion of land from food to fuel in the Corn Belt causes farmers elsewhere in the world to clear untouched land to make up for the loss.

The studies also said that some biofuels — waste material, forest residues, certain grasses — can be produced without harmful changes in land use and with benefit to the atmosphere. But the indirect effects of converting food crops to fuel production were found to cause net increases in emissions in almost every case.

The industry says that such indirect effects are impossible to measure and that the studies are premature. One industry group has asked the E.P.A. to ignore them entirely. But it seems clear on its face that some land-use changes — e.g., cutting down rain forests to plant crops — would have seriously negative effects.

In any case, it is the E.P.A.'s duty under the law to give the most unbiased, accurate accounting it can. The

issue here is the fate of the planet, not the fate of a particular industry.

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