

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Renewed interest

The idea of turning farm crops into fuel has intrigued a lot of folks recently, especially when American motorists were suffering through gas lines and record high fuel prices. From a consumer point of view that interest has ebbed somewhat, but it was never more on the minds of farmers than it is right now as they face disastrous crop incomes. Extremely low cash prices for

the nation's corn crop are causing farmers to wonder if there isn't something they can do besides feed it to livestock. And therein lies the interest in gasohol and all of the other fuel uses that have been proposed, imagined, even tested. For a while there were gas pumps at many stations with illustrations of ears of corn and the term "gasohol" in big letters. But

they've just about disappeared. A general lowering of fuel prices apparently forced the gasohol pumps right out of business. And while motorists were receptive to the idea, they weren't willing to pay a little more for a product that was generally understood to be a better product.

There's no doubt that gasohol can be produced and that large sums of U.S. grain could be turned into alcohol for use in that way. But for a number of reasons, it just isn't happening.

If you think the idea of mixing alcohol and gasoline for motor fuel is a new one, forget it. It's been around almost forever. And if you don't think old problems keep reoccurring, consider this statement from the Congressional Record of Jan. 28, 1935:

"We must alter our internal economy by processing surplus farm crops into alcohol to be mixed with gasoline in the proportion of 10 percent. We will be able to establish a balanced agriculture, a balanced industry, and preserve for ourselves the greatest market in all the world — namely the market in our land for our own

people. It is a kind of diversification through which we can preserve an internal prosperity and rid ourselves of a dangerous dependence on other nations."

That statement came from Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen almost 50 years ago in the midst of the very worst of times for farmers. Had we followed his advice we might not be in the mess we're in now — both energy wise and farm production wise.

Sad to say, American farmers have been promised a booming market for their output for so many years and it's just never materialized. Oh sure, there were a few boom years here and there, but there have been so many bust years that farmers have forgotten about the few good ones. They do remember the promises and the hope of new markets, new opportunities, of all-out agricultural production and the prosperity that would go with it. And yet, here they are again with a record crop, a tremendous surplus, crop prices below the cost of production for a number of major commodities, and a dependence on a world market that just isn't materializing.

Secretary of Agriculture John Block is telling our foreign competitors to knock off the government subsidies and allow American farm produce to compete on an even footing. But that's not going to happen. Those countries that are subsidizing their agriculture are doing so for their own good internal reasons. They're not about to cut it out to suit a U.S. secretary of agriculture or to save some bankrupt American farmers.

President Reagan says we won't use agricultural embargoes as a weapon. But do foreign buyers really believe him? No doubt the

messing around that has been done with our foreign customers over the past several years has had a serious impact on our export market.

The people who study export markets seem to think dependability is the watchword. Japan used to be heavily dependent on the U.S. for soybeans, and then somebody got the bright idea to have an embargo. That scared the Japanese government nearly to death, so they went out and found some other sources and they've been using them ever since. We still have a market in Japan, but not the market we should have and by no means not the total market that could have been ours.

While America may seem a fickle supplier in the world market, it must also be remembered that the world market is a fickle customer. American farmers who are counting on that world market to bail them out face some difficult prospects. Besides gum beating, there's very little we can do to force those countries to take our produce. We're not the only country with corn and soybeans to sell, and our prices aren't always the best.

So don't expect the world to be our salvation. Instead, it seems to me we must look to ways within this country to utilize our agricultural abundance. Alcohol production seems to be the most obvious and the easiest answer. Why it hasn't worked in more than 50 years of advocacy is a mystery to me, and why with long-term prospects of severe fuel shortages we aren't doing more with gasohol is amazing. It is time for some national efforts aimed at bringing America's farm surpluses and fuel shortages together toward a common solution.




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Pre-paid orders will be taken during January, February and March with the deadline for orders being March 31, 1983.

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