



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on November 13, 2013

Federal Ethanol Policy: Bad for the Planet, Good for Lobbyists

The federal government's push for greater ethanol production, carried out in the name of saving the planet, has done great harm to the environment. What's more, it has caused the release of far more carbon dioxide — the gas that is blamed for alleged global warming — into the atmosphere than the burning of ethanol could ever hope to save.

“The consequences are so severe that environmentalists and many scientists have now rejected corn-based ethanol as bad environmental policy,” the [Associated Press](#) wrote in a lengthy report. “But the Obama administration stands by it, highlighting its benefits to the farming industry rather than any negative impact.”



Washington has long encouraged the production of ethanol as a “green” alternative to fossil fuels, but the policy got a big boost in 2007 when Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed a law mandating the blending of ethanol into gasoline. The law was supported wholeheartedly by then-Sen. Barack Obama.

Once in the White House, Obama set about implementing the law. His “team at the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] was sour on the ethanol mandate at the start,” according to the AP.

As a way to reduce global warming, they knew corn ethanol was a dubious proposition. Corn demands fertilizer, which is made using natural gas. What's worse, ethanol factories typically burn coal or gas, both of which release carbon dioxide.

Then there was the land conversion, the most controversial and difficult-to-predict outcome.

Digging up grassland releases greenhouse gases, so environmentalists are skeptical of any program that encourages planting more corn.

On the other hand, the White House and the Department of Agriculture, headed by former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack, were all for it. Thus, when EPA models indicated that the ethanol mandate would not make fuel green enough to satisfy the law, the agency was pressured into rigging the input assumptions to produce the desired results. By assuming a huge increase in crop yields (and thus fewer new acres plowed) but a very small increase in corn prices, the EPA was able to claim that ethanol-blended gasoline would produce 21 percent fewer carbon dioxide emissions than standard gasoline, beating the law's emissions-reduction target by just one percentage point.

Those rigged assumptions turned out to be dead wrong. In no small part because of the ethanol mandate, the price of corn almost immediately surpassed the EPA's long-term estimate and is now more than double that estimate. Crop yields have hardly changed at all.



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That combination of factors could result in just one thing: the plowing of more acres to grow corn. That is, of course, exactly what happened. Prior to the ethanol mandate, farmers had been setting aside acreage as conservation land under a federal program that pays them not to grow crops. (Constitutional issues aside, this one combines good science with dubious global-warming alarmism; grassy areas conserve topsoil, which is beneficial, and absorb carbon dioxide, the gas that is supposedly going to cause us all to fry.) After the law kicked in, they began dropping out of the program because they could make more from growing corn than they could from the subsidy. As a result, seven million acres of conservation land have since been put to use.

That alone virtually wipes out any anti-global-warming effect that the mandate might have had. "In 2008," the AP recalled, "the journal *Science* published a study with a dire conclusion: Plowing over conservation land releases so much greenhouse gas that it takes 48 years before new plants can break even and start reducing carbon dioxide."

Farmers also began plowing virgin acreage, alarming environmentalists. Yet their erstwhile allies in the Obama administration went out of their way to ensure that the amount of virgin land being plowed under would not be reported. The AP, however, conservatively estimates that "1.2 million acres of virgin land in Nebraska and the Dakotas alone ... have been converted to fields of corn and soybeans since 2006, the last year before the ethanol mandate was passed."

Another big problem caused by the ethanol law is the growth in the amount of nitrogen fertilizer being used. "Between 2005 and 2010, corn farmers increased their use of nitrogen fertilizer by more than one billion pounds," reported the AP. "More recent data isn't available from the Agriculture Department, but because of the huge increase in corn planting, even conservative projections by the AP suggest another billion-pound fertilizer increase on corn farms since then."

With all this fertilizer being dumped in a relatively small portion of the country, its effects are particularly worrisome.

For one thing, nitrogen in drinking water is toxic to humans. Iowa's Des Moines Water Works faced such high levels of nitrates in its water sources this summer that it had to keep huge machines running constantly to clean the water, and it asked customers to reduce their water consumption. Minnesota's water system is also finding itself "overwhelmed by the increase in production pressure to plant more crops," Steve Morse, executive director of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership, told the AP.

The fertilizer runoff has deleterious effects downstream, too, wrote the AP:

The nitrates travel down rivers and into the Gulf of Mexico, where they boost the growth of enormous algae fields. When the algae die, the decomposition consumes oxygen, leaving behind a zone where aquatic life cannot survive.

This year, the dead zone covered 5,800 square miles of sea floor, about the size of Connecticut.

Larry McKinney, the executive director of the Harte Institute at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, says the ethanol mandate worsened the dead zone.

"On the one hand, the government is mandating ethanol use," he said, "and it is unfortunately coming at the expense of the Gulf of Mexico."

The dead zone is one example among many of a peculiar ethanol side effect: As one government program encourages farmers to plant more corn, other programs pay millions to clean up the mess.

Might the solution, therefore, be to shut down all the government programs, particularly since they



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have no constitutional justification anyway? Not on your life.

“Obama administration officials know the ethanol mandate hasn’t lived up to its billing,” observed the AP. But “the ethanol policy,” like so many other government programs, “cruises on autopilot.”

Revisiting the policy would require an admission that the government’s central planners were wrong, something politicians — perhaps especially Obama — are notoriously loath to do. The administration even ordered an Agriculture Department official who had expressed his doubts about the ethanol program to the AP to clam up.

Besides, the administration seems to have contented itself with good, old-fashioned political payoffs. The ethanol mandate may do nothing to stop “global warming” — in fact, it may actually increase the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere — and it may be working at cross-purposes with other programs that have at least some environmental benefit. But it’s good for certain industries with powerful lobbies.

“We are committed to this industry because we understand its benefits,” Vilsack told ethanol lobbyists recently. “We understand it’s about farm income. It’s about stabilizing and maintaining farm income which is at record levels.”

When it comes to ethanol policy, just ignore the administration’s bloviating about the environment. Instead, as with most other political decisions, follow the money.



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