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Attention Fracktivists: Corn Ethanol Is The Real Environmental Culprit

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Ethanol is proving terrible for the environment. Spurred by the absurd biofuel volumes mandated by the Federal Renewable Fuels Standard, farmers in recent years have plowed over 5 millions of acres of conserved land and virgin prairie. This has released massive amounts of carbon dioxide that had been locked in the soil. So much for ethanol's promise of being a carbon-neutral replacement for oil.



Ethanol fuel plant in West Burlington, Iowa. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

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Roughly 40% of America's corn crop goes to support ethanol production. From the late 2000s through 2012 corn prices — stimulated by the federal ethanol mandates — soared (<http://futures.tradingcharts.com/chart/CN/M>), surpassing \$7.50 a bushel last year before falling off. High prices naturally brought overfarming of corn, destroying animal habitats and causing massive water pollution from fertilizer runoff.

The evidence of water pollution caused by ethanol is obvious: nitrogen fertilizer applied in the corn fields has ruined wells under farmland and has seeped into rivers that millions of people rely on for drinking water. Eventually the chemicals drift down the Mississippi, resulting in a 5,800 square-mile dead

zone in the Gulf of Mexico. And farmers are having to pump more and more chemicals onto their fields. Because by insisting on growing cash-crop corn year after year rather than rotating their crops, farmers are knowingly depleting the quality of their soil, which then requires ever more additives to maintain yields.

But don't take my word for it. Read "[The Secret, Dirty Cost of Obama's Green Power Push](http://wtop.com/index.php?nid=1035&sid=3497726), (<http://wtop.com/index.php?nid=1035&sid=3497726>)" a 4,000-word report published today by the Associated Press. Dina Cappiello and her A.P. colleagues conclude that despite initial claims from President George W. Bush, that ethanol would make the country "stronger, cleaner and more secure," that hasn't been the case. On the contrary, she writes: "[T]he ethanol era has proven far more damaging to the environment than politicians promised and much worse than the government admits today."

You can't read this article and conclude that the nation's farmers ought to continue plowing over more and more land in a futile attempt to meet the federally mandated goal of 36 billion gallons of ethanol by 2022 (<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42824.pdf>), up from 14 billion gallons this year.

And the ethanol wet dream certainly makes no sense in light of the oil and gas boom that has blessed America in recent years. Drillers have found far more energy in the fossilized remains of ancient plant life miles under the surface than corn farmers could hope to grow in decades.

The A.P. writers don't get into the relative merits of drilling and fracking versus growing corn, but it's become increasingly clear that that the ire of the anti-fracking crowd is misplaced. Whereas fracktivists have been hard-pressed to identify even a dozen sites where fracking (rather than natural methane migration) can truly be blamed for groundwater pollution, the evidence of water pollution caused by nitrogen fertilizer is obvious and widespread (read [here](http://www.cbf.org/how-we-save-the-bay/issues/dead-zones/nitrogen-phosphorus) (<http://www.cbf.org/how-we-save-the-bay/issues/dead-zones/nitrogen-phosphorus>) about its impact on Chesapeake Bay). Fracking of oil and gas in shale formations has brought far more energy security to the U.S. than corn-based ethanol has. We simply don't need it to feed our cars, which are not only getting more efficient every year but can easily be made to run on natural gas or electricity rather than oil. (And if we really want ethanol, chemical company [Celanese \(/companies/celanese/\)](http://www.celanese.com) has [perfected a more efficient way](http://www.wfo.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/04/03/ethanol-minus-the-corn-it-could-fuel-america-if-it-werent-illegal/) (<http://www.wfo.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/04/03/ethanol-minus-the-corn-it-could-fuel-america-if-it-werent-illegal/>) to synthesize it, using natural gas.)

Anyone who truly thinks that this nation would be better off devoting 35 million acres and oceans of chemicals to growing a single bio-engineered crop ought to sit down with Michael Pollan's wonderful book "The Omnivore's Dilemma." He spells out how much more healthy Americans (and our environment) could be if



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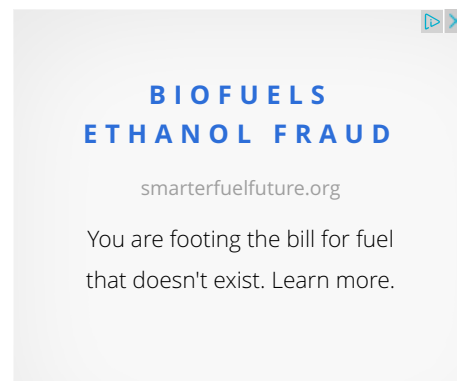
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How A Dumb Law Blocks A Great Way To Fuel America

(http://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/04/03/ethanol-minus-the-corn-it-could-fuel-america-if-it-werent-illegal/)

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we started dialing back the industrial corn monoculture and instead planted a myriad of different crops that enriched rather than depleted the soil. Furthermore, we'd have healthier, more nutritious animals to eat if we raised them on grass rather than corn (which they're not made for).

As Pollan explained in [this Q&A](#)

(http://www.us.penguingroup.com/static/rguides/us/omnivores_dilemma.html),

reducing America's corn obsession (which can only be done by slashing the ethanol mandate), is simply a matter of risk management: "[I]t's never a good idea to put all your eggs in one basket, as the Irish learned in 1845 when the Potato Famine hit. The Irish had a relationship with potatoes much like our relationship with corn—it was the mainstay of their agriculture and their diet. Monocultures are inherently precarious, which is why you don't find them ordinarily in nature. When blight hit the Irish potato crop, it was decimated overnight, and a million Irishmen starved. We're tempting fate by basing so much of our food supply on a single plant. A more diversified agriculture would be much more secure as well as healthier."

For more on ethanol check out my recent *Forbes Magazine* (<http://www.forbes.com/forbes/>) story on the fantasy of cellulosic ethanol: **"Same Moonshine, Different Name."**



The Clever Gimmicks Behind T. Boone Pickens' New 'Green' Fuel

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And be sure to take a look at the A.P.'s ethanol story (<http://wtop.com/index.php?nid=1035&sid=3497726>).

The World's Happiest And Saddest Countries 2013



1 of 40

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Torsten Laursen/Getty Images/Torsten Laursen/Getty Images



1. Norway

Enjoying the harborside in Bergen, Norway. In 2013 the Scandinavian nation ranked 1st overall on the Legatum Ins Prosperity Index for the fifth straight year, with leading sco

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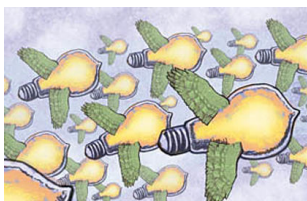
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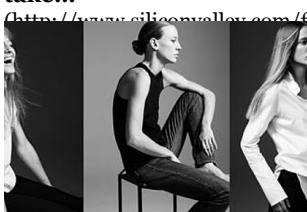


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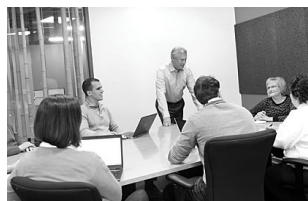


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