

Thoughts on Bio-Fuels

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Last winter a farm friend called to discuss the pros and cons of the latest proposed salvation for grain producers: bio-fuels. He was genuinely intrigued by the idea. On a small, local production scale, he imagined, it could offset the impact of rising energy costs in his own operation. It was not so different than his grandfather raising oats on a small portion of his land to feed the horses on which he relied for motive-power; in those days, the net return on energy was relatively good. On the negative side, the bio-fuel industry showed no signs of developing on a local scale regardless of what the technology might allow. That meant that the largest profits would continue to flow outside of his rural community. What really bothered him, though, was the idea that he should shift the focus of his crop production to bio-fuels so that, as he put it, some guy in a Hummer could barrel down Highway 2 burning all that “renewable” gasoline without a care for energy conservation. I have never heard my friend worry that a gluttonous consumer might eat too much of the grain, beans or beef he raised. Somehow food and energy were morally different.

The other contributors to this discussion have surveyed some very valuable points on the bio-fuels issue that I do not need to repeat. This short essay is meant to highlight a different dimension of what is at stake – mostly for grain producers – in the debate. In my experience, there is an uneasiness among farm people about growing grains or even plant-stalks as a fuel source, though it is not often said out loud, and after several years of negative net-income in the prairie grain-belt the prospect of any end-use that helps boost

commodity prices seems hard to refuse. That uneasiness is partly a matter of conscience, partly of farmers' self-identity and self-worth as *food producers* – even if that role has been devalued in the marketplace. The farmers I know imagine that they are engaged in good work, meaningful, important work, because, among other reasons, it feeds people. Their frustration at the popular perception that they live on subsidies, and at what sometimes seems like governments' willingness to abandon them, their skills and the whole notion of food sovereignty, comes directly from this inherent sense of importance. It is not that farm people are especially proud. Instead, it is that food is the most elemental human good. That doesn't change even though we live in a society that has grown dangerously removed from food production and therefore complacent about its food supply.

The risk for farmers in jumping head-first into the bio-fuels revolution is not just the economic one – that prices might be good now, but will they continue to keep pace with the rising cost of fuel, fertilizer, shipping, land, machinery and bank credit? That's a real enough risk. But it's also a familiar one. The risk I have in mind, the unspoken uneasiness, is that if farmers surrender the sense of purpose they have associated with food production for generations, they also lose the special claim they make on public policy and public sympathy. Not that the claim has been all that successful lately. That's what's pushed farmers into the situation where it can seem an attractive choice to raise crops for energy, and where the upward price pressures attributed to bio-fuel production now benefit them whatever choice they make as individuals. The risk is that farms become businesses like any other. Or, more precisely, they become the production equivalent of junior oil companies – and always ripe for takeover if the major players see

an opportunity; farmers become rig-workers, who may or may not own the land they work; and the countryside increasingly becomes a resource plantation precisely in those places that are most suited to food production and therefore most crucial to our food supply in the years ahead.

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