Burning What We Eat

by Brian Rozmahel

Are biofuels the answer to our growing energy needs? As the world uses up conventional energy sources, governments and energy companies are turning towards biofuels in order to quench our seemingly insatiable appetite for energy to run our modern world. When one takes a deeper look and ponders the role energy plays in virtually all aspects of our lives one can understand the rush towards finding new sources as world demand rises and traditional sources are depleted. Without a reliable steady supply of affordable energy chaos would descend upon all of us at breakneck speed. I recently ran into a friend who runs a trucking company and I asked him how the increase in oil prices and diesel fuel affects him. His response was passionate and well thought out. “It not only affects me and my business, but it will affect everybody in every aspect of their lives. People don’t realize that everything they have in their homes or on their table is brought to them by diesel motors. If diesel goes up so does everything else, and if diesel runs out, we’ll all starve to death.”

That got me to thinking. While he may be exaggerating slightly, he’s not far off. Food, clothing, shelter, health care and even entertainment are now intricately linked to energy. Modern agriculture and our global food system is highly dependant on a steady supply of energy to stock our abundant grocery shelves that we in Alberta often take for granted. Even a farmer’s fertilizer requirements comprise 50% of a farms energy needs. Take away energy and those tomatoes from California are no longer economically viable to ship to Alberta.

So in order for our society to run smoothly we need energy, and biofuels seem to offer us a solution. But with the technology we are using today, this solution comes at a price. Land that traditionally was used for growing food is now growing feedstocks for energy production. That means that food prices will go up as there is less food available for the worlds needs. So what are the consequences of that fact alone? Certainly we have already seen here in Alberta a greater portion of our incomes going towards buying food, but what about in poorer regions of the world where they don’t have the luxury of shifting entertainment dollars into groceries. For many families it is a life and death struggle as food continues to skyrocket out of reach. Now it has become a moral question. Do we choose biofuels so we can protect our lifestyle at the expense of the poor of the world? This is not a hypothetical question. World leaders met in Rome in early June 2008 to discuss the looming food crisis facing numerous countries around the globe, a crisis which has been exasperated by the recent floods in the US Midwest where corn production (a chief ingredient in ethanol production) was dealt an incredible blow. Climate change has put another risk into the already risky business of producing food. So we have to address the environmental problem of burning fossil fuels as well.

Often farmers who are growing feedstock for the biofuel industry are vilified as demons and they are easy targets for environmental and social justice groups. They are often portrayed as greedy, self interested, cold hearted producers putting their own needs ahead of the worlds poor. Nothing could be further from the truth. Farmers are just trying to make a living and for the past number of decades the world has lost many farmers due to its unpredictability and poor rates of return. It has been a long time since farmers in Alberta have been able to pencil in a profit in their grain operations. To scapegoat farmers would be shortsighted and lead nowhere. Pay farmers well for growing food and that will be their first choice every time. Farmers are as vulnerable to the heartless realities of the marketplace and are just trying to survive. Pay them for producing fuel and they will produce fuel. It’s as simple as that!

The bigger question we have to ask is if the production of biofuel is causing hardships

to a certain segment of the world's population and if that is true, are we as an affluent society willing to live with those realities? Do the so called environmental and economic benefits out weigh the social costs? If we stopped biofuel production, would our society spiral into chaos and disaster? These are difficult questions. Biofuel plants take huge amounts of capital to start up and shutting them down will cause economic losses to its investors and supporters. Not so easy.

One or the things I have come to realize in my studies and life experiences is the interconnectedness of all life. How we live and consume affects not only our own lives and the local environment, but reaches out and has an impact all around the world. We live in very challenging times and in order to meet these challenges we have to delve deeply into each issue and make informed, compassionate decisions.

Listed below are questions that students and classes can use to think about and debate the question of "Burning what we eat?"

- How did we get to where we are today and what is a solution to our addiction to energy?
- Is the production of biofuels putting off our development of more sustainable and moral ways of energy production?
- Just because we can do something does it make it right?
- Is the environment benefiting from biofuel production or is it exacerbating the problem of climate change by relying on the high energy inputs of industrialized agriculture?
- Do we have a responsibility to people who live in other countries with often dubious governments who squander food aid?
- Has the global, industrial food system benefited large multinational firms at the expense of farmers and the environment and is biofuel production just another way of padding their already enormous bank accounts?
- Are we on an inevitable collision course with disaster as energy needs outstrip supply or do we have the will to change?
- Are you personally willing to have less so others in other parts of the world can be lifted out of poverty?
- Should we be moving towards a more local economy in not only food production but manufacturing as well to reduce our need for more energy?
- Does biofuel production have a role to play in producing food on our farms? Is biofuels for tractors similar to oats and hay for draught horses in the past?

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