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Repeal the ethanol mandate

By Jane Van Ryan / The Star Press / July 6, 2016



This summer our family members, many of whom live in Muncie, will travel to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to reunite with relatives from Virginia for a few precious days of rest and relaxation. We will meet in Gatlinburg, a popular tourist destination in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, because the family's maternal grandmother grew up in that area, and we all visited Gatlinburg several times as children.

The trip will require several vehicles and a lot of fuel. In fact, we will burn more fuel than necessary due to the government's ethanol mandate. Congress enacted the ethanol mandate about a decade ago because it feared the United States was too dependent on foreign oil. The lawmakers hoped ethanol, which is mostly made from corn, and other homegrown biofuels, would replace some of the imported oil. But they did not anticipate that drilling companies would solve the problem of extracting oil from shale rock, making the United States the world's largest oil and natural gas producer.

Now the U.S. is awash in domestic oil and stuck with an ethanol mandate that forces consumers to pour ethanol into their tanks. Not only is the ethanol mandate wasting corn that should be consumed as food, but also it is wasting the money consumers use to purchase fuel.

Ethanol reduces mileage. E10, the common form of gasoline available today, contains up to 10 percent ethanol. But a gallon of ethanol contains only two-thirds of the energy in a gallon of gasoline. In fact, it takes 1.52 gallons of ethanol to replace the energy content of a gallon of gasoline. This means drivers who use E10 must fill up more often.

Several Muncie family members are planning to attend the Tennessee reunion and will drive about 400 miles one-way. The Virginia families will travel about 370 miles on each leg of the journey. Each will be forced to buy slightly more fuel due to ethanol's mileage penalty. If they can find it, they can purchase gasoline that does not contain ethanol. Straight gasoline is available at some service stations, and many motorists are buying it even though it usually costs a few cents more per gallon. Government statistics show demand for straight gasoline rose from 1.7 percent of total gasoline sales in 2012 to about 3.4 percent of total sales in 2014.

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Straight gasoline provides better mileage than ethanol-blended fuels, and it also avoids the mechanical problems that have been linked to ethanol. Older vehicles, outdoor equipment including chainsaws, many gasoline-powered farm tractors, and some of the most popular marine engines are incompatible with fuel containing ethanol. Ethanol is corrosive, and it has been blamed for clogging fuel lines and destroying engine components leading to expensive repairs.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government continues to increase the amount of ethanol that is supposed to be added to the nation's gasoline supply. As a result, it is quite possible that straight gasoline could become a thing of the past. Worse yet, gasoline supplies could exceed the 10 percent ethanol concentration, which is considered safe for most vehicles on the road today. Automakers already have warned against filling up with fuels containing more than 10 percent ethanol. When the Environmental Protection Agency said it would allow the sale of E15, a blend containing up to 15 percent ethanol, they announced they would void warranties for vehicles that mis-fueled with E15. Given the fact that the United States has plenty of oil, it makes no sense to continue mandating ethanol. The ethanol mandate should be repealed.

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