

THE HILL



THE EXECUTIVE

Biofuels 'juggernaut' makes some nervous

By Jim Snyder

June 29, 2007

In an era of bitter partisanship, increasing production of biofuels stands apart as an issue both Democrats and Republicans can embrace.

President Bush called for developing 35 billion gallons of alternative fuels in his State of the Union address. The Democratic-led Senate passed an energy bill that went a billion gallons better. The measure calls for 36 billion gallons to be produced annually by 2022, a big boost over the current federal mandate of 7.5 billion gallons.

Political pressure associated with high gas prices, growing concern about global warming, and the desire to boost lagging rural communities combined to create broad support for the new fuel mandate this Congress.

Biofuels have become "something of a juggernaut," David Waskow, of the group Friends of the Earth, said.

But as Congress looks to corn, wood chips, animal fat and switchgrass as alternatives to oil, unusual alliances are forming among groups worried Congress has not considered fully the ramifications of such a dramatic production increase.

Clean Air Watch and the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, for example, "butted heads" on tougher clean-air standards for small engines used in lawnmowers when Congress debated the issue two years ago, said Clean Air Watch President Frank O'Donnell.

The groups were like-minded, however, in their support for an amendment to the House energy bill, marked up yesterday, that would require the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to hold a public comment period before approving higher levels of ethanol blended with gasoline.

The amendment was authored by Reps. John Shadegg (R-Ariz.) and Charlie Melancon (D-La.). An energy panel approved the amendment yesterday.

The worry is that the increase in biofuels will lead to ethanol blends higher than 10 percent, which is the current limit set by EPA, according to William Guerry, a spokesman for the Alliance for Safe Alternative Fuel Environment, an umbrella group that includes small-engine makers.

Ethanol's higher oxygen content raises the temperature at which engines operate. Higher blends can destroy small engines, he said.

"We don't know how it is all going to be absorbed," Guerry said of the higher biofuel mandate.

Guerry's group and others successfully lobbied to direct EPA to study the effects of mid-level ethanol levels in the Senate bill.

But Guerry said the group remains concerned their fears won't be addressed adequately given the political popularity of ethanol and other biofuels.

The Senate bill divides alternative fuels into conventional and advanced categories. Only 15 billion gallons of the 36 billion gallon mandate could come from corn-based ethanol.

The rest would have to be advanced fuels like cellulosic ethanol. Cellulosic ethanol promises more environmental benefits than corn-based ethanol, but a technological breakthrough is needed for it to be economically viable.

Food and livestock groups are complaining that the current federal mandate of 7.5 billion gallons has already raised commodity prices. The environmental hazards of the fuels standard have been less publicized.

Environmental groups say they support the development of alternative energy, but that not all biofuels are created equal.

"We're trying to get Congress to realize how you produce biofuels determines whether they are good for the environment or bad for the environment," a renewable fuels expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council, Nathanael Greene, said.

Groups like NRDC worry the biofuel crush may increase smog pollution, deplete aquifers and trample critical habitats as more land is put in production to meet the federal mandate.

"We are very concerned about the environmental impact of shifting to that much of a larger scale," Waskow, who is the international program director for Friends of the Earth, said.

The executive director for the National Association of Clean Air Agencies, Bill Becker, said Congress was taking a "ready, fire, aim" approach to biofuels production.

"You have to take care when you are trying to tackle one problem that you don't exacerbate another problem," Becker said.

EPA estimates, for example, that the 7.5 billion gallon ethanol mandate could increase smog pollution by 4 to 6 percent in areas where ethanol is not currently used. EPA also found pollutants like benzene would fall as a consequence of the new mandate.

Smog can trigger asthma attacks and exacerbate other pulmonary illnesses.

“Imagine the consequences we could see in a program that quintuples the usage,” Becker said.

A spokesman for the Renewable Fuels Association, Matt Hartwig, defended the Senate bill, saying more ethanol production will increase U.S. energy independence and cut down on greenhouse-gas emissions.

But environmental groups had sought a number of safeguards in the Senate bill that didn't make it in.

They included barring native forest or grasslands as a source of biofuels, requiring the use of ethanol production techniques that use less water and promoting “best practices” in agriculture to prevent an increase in pollution runoff as crop production increases to meet the demands of the mandate market.

Waskow said one gallon of ethanol can consume four to five gallons of water.

“We are going to begin depleting aquifers if we start this,” Waskow said.

Hartwig said newer ethanol plants already are much less resource-intensive than older ones, and indicated the market will address the concerns expressed by NRDC and Friends of the Earth.

“This is a very competitive industry,” he said. “The technology is changing on an almost daily basis.”

Environmental lobbyists, however, hold out hope their concerns will be addressed as the bill progresses. Waskow said he didn't believe there was widespread opposition to the fixes his group and others pushed. Yet, he noted, “the clock was working against us” in the Senate debate.

Environmental groups felt they had bipartisan support for requiring advanced biofuels to release half the carbon dioxide that traditional gasoline emits.

The Senate bill requires a 20 percent reduction in both conventional and advanced fuels.

That standard in the bill is a “pretty low bar,” Greene said.