

Bike to Work Week

By Maggie Creamer, staff writer
Lodi News Sentinel, Tues., May 10, 2011

The partnership is supporting and letting its members know about the nationwide Bike to Work Week, which promotes bicycling to work to reduce pollution. Watts plans to ride her bike to work at least once.

She told board members about an event from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday at Lodi's Post Office Plaza to kick off the week.

Bicyclists and pedestrians will be able to stop at a refuel station and participate in a biking safety discussion with members of the Lodi Police Department. R.E.I. will also provide a free maintenance clinic for cyclists.

Attendees will receive a free T-shirt and promotional items, and can register for a chance to win other prizes.

Commute Connection, a regional rideshare program, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are also sponsoring the event.

Corn food vs. fuel battle turns political again

By John Ellis, staff writer
The Fresno Bee, Sun., May 8, 2011

Corn prices are way up, and cattle ranchers, dairymen and others who depend on the grain to feed their animals are pointing to corn ethanol as the culprit.

Prices are up, they say, because demand for corn used as a fuel source has skyrocketed.

The battle has once again found its way into the political realm, where efforts are under way at both the state and national levels to cut subsidies for the corn-based additive, which is blended into gasoline to help it burn more cleanly.

Last week, U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat, and Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican, introduced legislation that would eliminate a cash subsidy that gives oil refiners 45 cents for every gallon of ethanol they blend with gasoline.

At the same time, a bill proposed by Assembly Member David Valadao, R-Hanford, that would have eliminated state funding for ethanol derived from corn was defeated in a state legislative committee. Valadao has vowed to bring the bill back in the near future.

Riverdale dairy operator Jamie Bledsoe said corn ethanol is hurting business, which in turn costs jobs and, ultimately, hurts consumers who pay higher prices.

In 2003, he paid \$96 a ton for rolled corn to feed his cows. Today, he is paying \$320 a ton.

"They are basically turning food into fuel, and it is being subsidized by the government," Bledsoe said. "I feel like I am competing against Uncle Sam for my corn."

But ethanol producers dispute being cast as villain in this economic drama.

Fresno resident Bill Jones, the former California Secretary of State who is chairman of the board for Pacific Ethanol, said corn ethanol has helped keep gas prices down. He also said it is a vital product that will help wean America off its oil dependence while a new generation of non-corn ethanol is developed.

"It is a very important transition fuel," Jones said.

Ethanol isn't new, and neither are subsidies for the additive. But the debate picked up after then-Gov. Gray Davis ordered gasoline producers to phase out the additive oxygenate methyl tertiary butyl ether, or MTBE, which was found to be polluting ground water.

In the mid-2000s, corn prices started to rise as demand for the commodity -- driven by its use as a fuel additive -- skyrocketed.

Corn went from around \$2.20 a bushel to as high as \$7.57 a bushel. On Friday, the price was slightly less than \$7 a bushel.

Michael Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairymen in Modesto, said the problem has been exacerbated by Midwestern farmers who have increased corn production at the expense of soy and other crops. Soy also is used to feed cows.

The result, Marsh said: feed costs once made up around 49% of the total monthly cost of maintaining a cow. By 2009, it was pushing 58%. The difference is breaking some dairies, he said.

But Jones, the Pacific Ethanol chairman, called this "a very complex issue that is easy to demagogue. That's why you see such an unusual alliance on [Valadao's] bill."

Indeed, Valadao's bill found dairy and poultry interests aligned with the Sierra Club of California and the Union of Concerned Scientists, two groups that are concerned about corn ethanol's effect on the environment.

Jeremy Martin, a senior scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists' Clean Vehicles Program, disputes the idea that corn ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

He said countries like Brazil have increased corn acreage by plowing under tropical rainforests, which increases the release of carbon into the atmosphere.

Such increases outside the U.S. are the result of more domestic corn going to food, and not fuel. The food demand, however, is still there.

The environmental community is instead pushing "advanced biofuels," which include ethanol produced from non-food sources such as perennial grasses, wood chips and wheat straw.

"We don't think that throwing money at corn ethanol is best way get to the next generation of biofuels," Martin said, referring to the subsidies. "Ultimately, we can't address oil dependence or climate change by producing more and more corn ethanol."

Jones disagreed. For now, he said, it is the best alternative fuel on the market. He cited a study by Iowa State University and University of Wisconsin economists that found increased use of ethanol reduced gas prices by an average of 89 cents per gallon in 2010.

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Building facilities to handle alternative biofuels is expensive because it takes such a large amount of fuels such as as wood chips and wheat straw to make them profitable, Jones said. The better strategy is to build these biofuels into corn ethanol plants over time.

Jones also disputed that the development of corn ethanol is a "food versus fuel" matter. "It is food and fuel," he said.

The nation's corn crop has doubled in the past five to six years. The corn price has increased, he said, but that increase has eliminated the need for a subsidy for corn growers.

Finally, Jones said Pacific Ethanol's four plants -- including one in Madera and one in Stockton -- provide feed as part of the manufacturing process.

As part of the corn ethanol process, he said, starch is removed from the corn to convert to sugar. That leaves protein, which is sold to dairies.

For every ton of corn, one-third is later sold as feed. Jones said it has 130% of the nutritional value of corn, and is 70% of the price.

Commodity prices are up across the board, Jones said. Not only corn, but cotton, gold and elsewhere. Speculators do that, he said.

Without ethanol, Jones said, the state's residents would pay more for gas, have about half the amount of corn produced, and face worse air quality.

Ethanol producers were joined in the quest to defeat Valadao's bill by trade unions that were focused on a single issue -- jobs, union officials said.

Bledsoe, the Riverdale dairy farmer, produced his own statistic. A study by the California Milk Advisory Board, he said, found a 1,000-cow dairy like his produces a total of 232 jobs either directly or indirectly.

The battle over corn ethanol subsidies, it seems, is far from over.

Valadao -- a dairy farmer himself -- called subsidies "bad public policy" and said the defeat of his bill "is bad news for those that consume food, work in agriculture, or care about the environment, and good news for a small group of wealthy corn ethanol producers."

Feinstein's statement said corn ethanol was "the only industry that benefits from a triple crown of government intervention: its use is mandated by law, it is protected by tariffs, and companies are paid by the federal government to use it."

[Fresno Bee editorial, Mon., May 9, 2011:](#)

High-speed rail still the right track for California

Our region will benefit with jobs as a result of first segment coming here.

California's high-speed rail project is moving forward, even as its designers adjust proposed routes, maneuver around political landmines and worry about the ups and downs of state and federal financing. But it remains clear that high-speed rail is in California's future.

The proposal has undergone an aggressive vetting process, and that can only strengthen the final product. High-speed rail leaders must be able to answer legitimate concerns raised by critics and others concerned about its viability.

High-speed rail is a proven technology, and most of the barriers are over routes, land acquisition and financing. Those issues can be overcome, although the timeline for completion undoubtedly will lengthen. Private financing must be found to go along with public dollars already committed to the project.

In addition, a final business plan must be devised before the Legislature and State Treasurer Bill Lockyer will approve the selling of the bonds that the voters have already approved for the project.

This is a massive system that will tie the state's population centers together, and the logistics of planning and building the project are significant.

Just this week, we learned that the southern route may change, the tracks through Fresno could impact Roeding Park and aerial tracks are being removed from several alternatives being considered between Merced and Fresno. These issues and others must be resolved during the planning process.

But we are confident that high-speed rail will be built in California, which has been a leader of the movement in the United States. The San Joaquin Valley will benefit because the initial California line will be built in this region.

With the first segment of the high-speed tracks getting ready for construction, it will be a huge job creator for a region that has an unemployment rate well above the state and national jobless rates.

We believe high-speed rail must be part of our nation's transportation future. It would help reduce dependence on foreign oil, lower greenhouse gas emissions and provide a cheaper alternative to costly air travel. We won't be able to build enough freeways if the automobile remains the only significant transportation alternative in the Golden State.

High-speed rail makes sense in a 21st century California.