April 29, 2008

Letter to the Editor
The Clarion-Ledger
Box 40
Jackson, MS 39205-0040

Dear Clarion-Ledger,

I read with great concern the submission by Tim Kalich (The ‘myth’ of ethanol could hit Delta hard – April 27) and found that his accusations and claims about biofuels, ethanol in particular, had to be addressed.

Mr. Kalich’s analysis is flawed throughout the article as he tries to make the case for business as usual in the Delta and that biofuels are a terrible product for the American people. In essence, he has attempted to overly simplify a very complex problem that is influenced by many domestic and global issues. While corn-based ethanol does have a recognizable impact on the costs of corn, processing, transportation, energy, packaging, labor, and marketing costs, international demand, and the weak dollar all have much greater impacts on the rise of food costs. While energy costs affect prices more quickly, labor costs have increased substantially and making it the largest component of the retail food bill. In addition, our devalued dollar is making our agricultural products much more affordable to foreign countries thus increasing their demand.

Many have found biofuels to be a quick and easy target for those who choose not to take the time and effort to fully investigate the larger picture of the true impacts of energy and food issues on the American people. A fear of change and skepticism in new technologies just keeps us heading down the same road we have been traveling.

Well, business as usual is costing Americans $1.5 billion/day in oil import costs. Business as usual is providing us with near daily record crude oil prices and national gasoline and diesel prices ($3.60 national average cost as of 4/28/08). Business as usual is increasing prices and price volatility in the natural gas and coal markets. And business as usual has stymied the construction new of refineries and nuclear power facilities for nearly 30 years. Meanwhile, our trade deficit has reached over $860 billion – most of that deficit attributable to the costs of energy.

Agriculture and forestry producers have been constant leaders in change and adoption of new production systems and product utilization. From mechanization, to the judicious use of pesticides, to the adoption of biotechnology and remote sensing technologies,
farmers and foresters are showing the way to new energy opportunities. Corn-based ethanol is one such pathway. We should be encouraging this type of entrepreneur spirit instead of lambasting domestic, value-added uses of farm products. Virtually all cotton leaves the U.S. for further processing and manufacturing, but returns as a finished product for our consumption. Why can’t we implement ways to utilize farm products at home AND help to address our energy concerns?

I will admit that corn and soybean-based fuels are not perfect, but they do represent an option and new choice for consumers to meet our growing energy needs. How you can surmise that a renewable, biodegradable biofuel is less environmentally friendly than a one-time use, petroleum-based resource is beyond me. And if people knew the true costs of petroleum after the costs of tax breaks and incentives to the oil industry, environmental costs, and international oil shipping security costs were factored in, we would all be shaking our heads. However, according to Merrill Lynch analyst Francisco Blanch, “oil and gasoline prices would be about 15% higher if biofuel producers weren’t increasing their output.” (March 24, 2008; Wall Street Journal) At today’s prices, that would mean gasoline would be nearly 54 cents more per gallon at the pump!

We need a well balanced debate on the issues surrounding energy and potential solutions. I noticed that while Mr. Kalich’s article criticizes all aspects of biofuels, he offers no alternatives to using petroleum to meet our energy needs. In addition, he fails to recognize the gains in the research and development of the next-generation cellulosic biofuel technologies which produce fuels from non-food feedstocks such as switchgrass and forest residues. Again, his message of concern is undermined by misinformation about biofuels and an over-simplified analysis of complex systems. I ask that you demand a basic level of accuracy and balance from the stories that you run in the future regarding our energy needs.

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