

Ethanol pandering in Iowa

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

Promises, promises. They range from that oft-heard pledge to quit booze or cigarettes to the ecclesiastical vow of poverty, chastity and obedience.

More familiar at this moment are the promises that become a part of any political campaign. And there's no reason to object, I suppose, until we hear every candidate in sight uttering the same guarantee. Then maybe someone should ask - "Anyone out there who's for protecting the public interest?"

Except for such obvious beneficiaries as political consultants and TV time salespeople, we can all feel a sense of relief that the Iowa caucuses will be over in a few weeks. With this exercise in democracy behind us, perhaps the question of ever more subsidies for ethanol can be put to rest. Well, at least for another four years.

With no candidate for president wishing to be outdone, the pandering to please Iowa farmers, plus the 6,000 workers who man the state's first 28 ethanol refineries (with more on the planning boards), must surely end in a history-making tie between Republicans and Democrats. The Hawkeye State has been induced to believe it will benefit by doing more of what it does best - growing corn. And selling it not only as a foodstuff but to produce a fuel substitute increasing auto mileage while reducing pollution.

Two of the top presidential aspirants in Iowa had always voted consistently and perhaps conscientiously against government subsidies for ethanol. These were Republican "straight talker" John McCain (who knocked ethanol even as he sought Iowa's caucus votes back in 2000) and Democrat Hillary Clinton. McCain now says he's willing to give the product "a new look" in light of the nation's need for energy independence.

Sen. Clinton is an even more recent convert. Having voted against the biofuel subsidy at every opportunity in her nearly seven Senate years, she now has introduced a \$50 billion strategic energy proposal that one critic finds "awash in ethanol incentives." Clinton defenders note that she's not simply warbling the words those Iowans love to hear. No indeed - the senator's New York state already has five ethanol refineries of its own under construction.

As for her closest rival Barack Obama, the Illinois senator's vote on such subsidies has always favored his corn-glutted Hawkeye neighbors across the river.

Presently leading Iowa's polls on the Republican side, ex-Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney aired a TV spot depicting himself alongside a man-sized ear of corn. Rival Mike Huckabee can't afford TV, but after watching giant cylinders turning corn into 200-proof alcohol in Iowa Falls, the ex-Arkansas governor exclaimed, "Down

my way, we'd call that 'white lightning!' (a once fond term for moonshine)."

Such is the gay abandon of this election's cheering section for ethanol. Yet it's another of those economic sham solutions that periodically bloom like a morning glory, then fade like a poppy at sunset. The sad truth is that continued ethanol production raises more problems than can be counted - in the long run, even for those farmers who've been rubbing their hands at visions of endless corn acreage drawing the top dollar. Many of them hope to hasten that joyful day by sending donations to pandering office-seekers.

Let's assume that every claimed benefit to the motoring public, as well as to these tawny tillers of Iowan soil, were unchallenged. Ethanol is still like one of those wonder drugs whose time has come - and gone. It first gained a foothold after the Arab oil embargo in the early 1970s. A substitute for gasoline based on home-grown grain seemed a happy means of ending our dependence on crude oil from parts of the world we find politically unreliable.

Congress moved toward support for corn conversion despite a Department of Agriculture report predicting it would mean "massive government subsidies." There were warnings, too, that land planted to corn consumes huge amounts of irrigation - water that agronomists agree is already in perilously short supply, with urban growth tapping into the sources that farmers thought were theirs.

As recently as October of this year - indeed, just as the Iowa campaign was getting serious - the National Academy of Sciences voiced new alarm over the impact of continued ethanol production on future water availability. Although properly professorial in tone, its report conjured droughts comparable to those of biblical times.

And though we all deplore tattlers, it is to be noted that the academy report was concurred in by two profs from the University of Iowa. I trust both of them enjoy tenure.

Van Deerlin represented a San Diego County district in Congress for 18 years.

Ethanol pandering in Iowa by Lionel_Van_Deerlin