The limits of ethanol

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Amid the gusher of ethanol news since President Bush called for an aggressive boost in production, one fact has become as clear as a gallon of grain alcohol. Ethanol is only a part of the solution. Other steps will be needed to wean Americans from the pernicious effects of foreign oil and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

In his State of the Union address in January, Bush called for production of ethanol and other alternative fuels to rise to 35 billion gallons a year by 2017. Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle, likewise, has set a target of a quarter of all liquid fuels from renewable sources by 2025.

Worthy goals. Ethanol is cleaner-burning than gasoline and emits fewer greenhouse gases. But ethanol has limitations.

Greater use of corn-based ethanol may skew other farm prices and push up the cost of food. As Bush noted on a swing through Missouri last week, "That's fine if you're a corn grower, but it's not fine if you're a hog raiser."

There are concerns about ethanol's efficiency - the Department of Energy estimates that drivers can expect at least a 15 percent reduction in fuel economy. And there are questions about air pollution produced by ethanol distilleries. Large-scale production of ethanol will require large investments in new infrastructure to handle and move this more corrosive product.

In the long run, ethanol from wood chips, soybeans, garbage or even the stalks of corn might solve some of these concerns.

But Bush should also push automakers for improvements in fuel economy and lead an effort to encourage conservation generally. His proposals to increase fuel standards by 4 percent a year over the next 10 years can be charitably described as modest. In addition, more federal research dollars are needed to explore fuel cell technology as a successor to the internal combustion engine.

The country needs a solution, and it's encouraging that the president finally is focusing on the problem. For too long, American energy policy has been hostage to rogue states like Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. Global warming may provide the most compelling reason to wean ourselves from the addiction to fossil fuels. But the efforts must be broad-based and long-lasting to be effective. For more information about ethanol and other alternative fuels, go to the U.S. Department of Energy's Data Fuels Center at www.eere.energy.gov/afdc.

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