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Biofuels burn bright in Oregon's future

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B iofuels have been taking more than their fair share of criticism these days. But as facts have replaced hype, the realities of the global food network are proving more complicated than simplistic and misguided attempts to blame biofuels for rising food prices. The skyrocketing cost of oil, the declining value of the U.S. dollar, increased demand for grain from developing countries such as China and India, and serious droughts occurring throughout the world are all affecting the cost of food.

Looked at fairly in comparison with other energy options, biofuels are unquestionably part of an overall energy solution that also emphasizes conservation and efficiency. Honestly, what would people who blast biofuels prefer? It's clearly immoral to support the petroleum-based status quo and all the global issues that arise from it, including a trillion-dollar war in Iraq and the coddling of countries that do not support our democratic values.

How much food would that trillion dollars have bought?

It's clear that as we expand the use of biofuels, it will be important to include environmental safeguards and to accelerate the development of more advanced biofuels such as cellulosic ethanol. This thoughtful approach to the growth of the biofuel industry is being promoted by leaders in the industry itself, particularly those with Oregon ties. As the biofuel industry expands, there inevitably will be major corporate players involved that are not as environmentally enlightened. But that's the case in any industry. People and policymakers will increasingly need to learn to distinguish among them. Fortunately, federal and state policies promoting biofuels have environmental performance standards built in, and Oregon has positioned itself to reap the benefits.

For example, Oregon's biofuels program includes a renewable fuel standard that ensures market access for ethanol and biodiesel and includes incentives for cellulose and other green waste products that will be the next feedstocks for biofuels. As a result, the state has moved to the front of the line among attractive places to invest in biofuels production. More than $300 million already has been invested in ethanol plants in Boardman and Clatskanie, as well as biodiesel production facilities in Salem, Pendleton, Portland and Klamath Falls. And the U. S. Department of Energy recently announced that Oregon will be home to the first cellulosic ethanol demonstration plant in the Northwest. These capital-intensive investments are bringing good-paying jobs and local tax revenue to parts of the state that need it most.

In addition, the Federal Energy Independence and Security Act, signed late last year, locked in key safeguards. The new law ensures that biofuel crops will be grown only on historic cropland, requires new ethanol plants to generate at least 20 percent less greenhouse gas emissions than conventional gasoline refineries, caps the

amount of corn ethanol allowed under the renewable fuel standard and ensures that more than half of renewable fuels produced will come from advanced technologies.

Meanwhile, gas prices have reached $4 a gallon this spring and with it more of our hard-earned money flows out of the local economy to the Middle East every day. So let's cool down the rhetoric and embrace biofuels for what they are: a key part of our future energy mix that has significantly reduced environmental and political impacts compared with the status quo. And what's more, Oregon is well positioned to reap the economic development benefits of this energy source.

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