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During a "Soup & Song" event sponsored by Chuck and Pat Hackney at Bethel Baptist in Fruitport, this group played a couple of songs with their harmonicas. Check with the church for the date of the next potluck & song. Photo by Mariann Cooper

## Al Gore comes clean on ethanol

(Courtesy, Beef Magazine, January, 2011)

"Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore told a green-energy conference in Athens last month that support for corn-based ethanol in the U.S. was "not a good policy."

"Due to the unfavorable energy-conversion ratios, 'it's not a good policy to have these massive subsidies for (U.S.) first-generation ethanol,' Gore said. But, he added, 'It's hard once such a program is put in place to deal with the lobbies that keep it going.'

"Reuters reports that Gore attributed his initial support for ethanol subsidies to his presidential ambitions. 'One of the reasons I made that mistake is that I paid particular attention to the farmers in my home state of Tennessee, and I had a certain fondness for the farmers in the state of Iowa because I was about to run for president,' he said.

"Gore was a crucial ethanol advocate, even casting, as vice-president, the tie-breaking vote in 1994 in the U.S. Senate to uphold the Environmental Protection Agency's ethanol mandates.

"Of his previous support for those mandates, Gore now says that, while a range of factors have contributed to a food-price crisis, there's no doubt of biofuels' effect.

"The size, the percentage of corn particularly, which is now being (used for) first-generation ethanol definitely has an impact on food prices. The competition with food prices is real,' he said." •

## Energy's bottom line

By Dr. E. Kirsten Peters

I'm trained in geology, but I don't work in the energy industry. That means I'm an interested bystander on the sidelines of the energy game, more eager than most to see the execution of the next play on the turf — but I'm not on one of the teams actually touching the ball.

The people who are out there on the playing field have to make complex judgments about what will power us through tomorrow. American business people make educated guesses all the time about whether to invest in what may be emerging energy technologies. And members of Congress also make some similar decisions. That's because the government both supports basic energy research and subsidizes all the forms of energy I know about.

One of the ways our collective tax dollars help make energy cheaper in the marketplace is the subsidy of ethanol made from corn. Ethanol is the time-honored chemical that's in whiskey and wine. Today, on an enormous scale, ethanol is blended into the gasoline we buy at the corner gas station. If you read the fine print on the gas pump, you'll see how much ethanol is blended into what your car burns.

The tax subsidy on ethanol destined for gasoline was small in the 1970s when it began. But it's grown over the decades. The cost of our ethanol subsidy is now measured in the billions of dollars per year. At the same time, ethanol used for energy accounts for a lot of our corn crop. According to recent news reports, we'll plow about 41 percent of our nation's corn into ethanol this year. That's a lot of tortilla chips we are burning on our highways.

Corn-based ethanol has become more controversial as the industry has grown bigger. In the most recent twist of the debate about the fuel, former vice president Al Gore has changed sides in the argument. At a gathering in Greece this fall, he publicly reversed his support for ethanol made from corn. The switch means he has joined people like the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* in their plea that we end the corn-ethanol subsidy. It's not every day that Mr. Gore and the *Wall Street Journal* agree on

## Where your taxes go

By David Kendall and Jim Kessler

(Courtesy, Reader's Digest, February, 2011)

A U. S. Taxpayer earning the 2009 median income (\$34,140) and paying \$5,400 in federal income tax and FICA ponies up for the following, for starters:

Social Security	\$1,040.70
Medicare	\$625.51
Medicaid	\$385.28
Interest on the national debt	\$287.03
Combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan	\$229.17
Military personnel	\$192.79
Veterans benefits	\$74.65
Federal highways	\$63.89
Health care research	\$46.54
Foreign aid	\$46.08
Education funding for low-income K-12 students	\$38.17
Military retirement benefits	\$32.60
Pell Grants for low-income college students	\$29.75
NASA space program	\$28.09
Internal Revenue Service	\$17.69
Environmental clean up	\$11.67
FBI	\$11.21
Head Start	\$10.91
Public housing	\$10.50
National parks	\$4.27
Drug Enforcement Administration	\$3.14
Amtrak	\$2.23
Smithsonian Museum	\$1.12
Funding for the arts	\$0.24
Salaries and benefits for members of Congress	\$0.19 •

stuff.

But it's the muck and mire of politics that are important to me as a geologist. What's really at stake is the bottom line. Do we get more energy out of corn-ethanol than we put in?

Making corn into ethanol takes work. We plant the crop, then harvest the corn from the field. Next, we must process it, and then ferment the grain. After all that, we have to extract the ethanol we want from the thin soup of the stuff we have made.

How much energy do we actually get out of the ethanol we burn in our gas tanks compared to the energy we put into making the fuel from corn?

The scientists and engineers I've read on this subject down through the years have mostly said we gain very little energy from our work. Basically, we put a unit of energy into the process and get just a little bit more back out than we put in. The fancy way of describing it is what's called "energy conversion ratios."

Speaking of ethanol made from corn in his recent speech, former vice president Gore said, "The energy conversion ratios are at best very small."

That quotation indicates quite a change from Gore's earlier public statements. I'm not criticizing him or anyone else when I say that we all need to set aside our politics and look critically at energy sources.

We Americans need to diversify our sources of energy, and some forms of biofuels will be part of the mix that can help us in the coming decades. But we've got a variety of choices to make and more research to do. In the end, we've got to keep our eyes on what makes good sense for the next round of energy innovation. Big energy conversion ratios are what we need from biofuels in the coming years. That's the bottom line no matter your politics.

Dr. E. Kirsten Peters is a native of the rural Northwest, but was trained as a geologist at Princeton and Harvard. Questions about science or energy for future Rock Docs can be sent to [epeters@wsu.edu](mailto:epeters@wsu.edu). This column is a service of the College of Sciences at Washington State University. •