

Vilsack Eyes Vital Role Of Renewable Fuels To U.S. Future

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

As we head toward the end of May, I am steadily closing in on my final trimester with my third pregnancy. My oldest child is out of school and we've all had to adjust to the change in routine. Rainy days, like what forecasters are predicting for the next few days, don't help. We're spending as much time outside as we can, after waiting for winter to make a late departure (the last snow event was the end of April) and before the weather turns into the long, dog days of summer when it's simply too humid and hot to be outside for more than a few minutes — at least for someone hugely pregnant.

The pasture has been cross-fenced into four paddocks, with the livestock being moved every week. All of the sheep and goats have had their babies, and while the goat crop this year was a little sorry, the lamb crop is stellar. And if the market prices hold, it'll be a great paycheck this fall — though I'll feel a little sad not keeping back any of the ewe lambs to build the flock. But, as agreed upon, we're focusing on adding only one new thing a year — and a new baby will certainly be 2011's new thing.

The hens are producing eggs marvelously. We're selling them by the dozen to friends, family, neighbors, and others within a 30-mile radius. It's nothing on a major scale, but perfect to give us a little spending money when we have the urge to grab a fruit smoothie at the local café.

At my parents' ranch, calving, kidding, and lambing are in full force. Recent rains have treated the pastures wonderfully, and as long as the guard animals continue doing their jobs, they are hoping to have a great crop to sell this fall and winter, as well.

Outside of my personal biosphere, the news is a lot more interesting: The USDA has changed guidelines for safe temperatures of cooked meat, some regions of the country are experiencing way too much precipitation while Texas is battling topsoil-cracking drought conditions, U.S. Ag Secretary's Vilsack says developing renewable energy is a matter of national security, Utah horse owners are concerned with an outbreak of Equine Herpes, U.S. House GOP is seeking big spending cuts to the FDA including food inspectors, and more just as varied in subject material. Ah, never a dull moment in agriculture.

Considering that I am probably not alone in my disgust at handing over \$60 or more to fill up my car's tank each time I coast into the gas station on fumes — hey, if I wait to fill up my tank, maybe the price of gas will go down (hasn't happened yet, but I'm still allowed to dream) — let's take a closer look at Vilsack's remarks about domestic biofuels development.

He was speaking live on the RFD TV program, "Home Grown Energy: Fueling America's Future," on May 23, meaning he was privy to entertaining comments from the studio audience as well as call-in questions from viewers around the nation.

The program's moderator opened discussion by stating how much U.S. consumers spend on fuel each day for their personal and business vehicles, including tractors and other agricultural equipment: \$1 billion. That, in itself, is a lot of money. Now, consider this: According to Vilsack, 17 percent of that billion dollars a day goes to the Middle East — the region that is in constant turmoil, often at odds with the U.S. Vilsack wholeheartedly believes that "we can replace that 17 percent with home-grown fuels like ethanol and biodiesel."

So do I. It's one of those moments that I call a "duh" moment, because it should be common sense that the U.S., with all of our technological advances, should be able to figure out a way to do this. It's simply a matter of priority — what does our government see as important enough to funnel research and development dollars to. The money is there; it's just likely going to something else, like paying mega-bucks in subsidies to farmers who know how

different story for another time. Back to Vilsack and renewable energy.

So, in the next segment, Vilsack made the point why developing renewable fuels is important to national security. A wise move on Vilsack's part, as "national security" is quite the buzz word now and I'm sure one of those terms that policymakers scan their letters from constituents to see whether a proposal being made is one that is worthy of attention. He pointed out the majority of oil the U.S. consumers every day is imported, and because oil is a global commodity, we're paying unfriendly countries like Iran for oil even when we're not buying directly for them. It's ironic really: We're at odds with many Middle Eastern countries, even sacrificing our military men and women there, but yet we're so dependent on those countries to run our infrastructure. The only solutions that should make a bit of sense — another "duh" moment — is that we stop supporting the countries who are requiring our military intervention.

Apparently the U.S. Department of Defense is seeing this case, too, as Vilsack reported that the U.S. Navy is working toward replacing half of its fuel usage with biodiesel. Super! Now we just got to get the non-military U.S. consumers to care about doing the same thing — particularly the consumers who are involved in the manufacturing of automobiles, because yes I can face the fact that I am dependent on what fuel my car is able to run on, and no matter how much I try to force it to run on E85 rather than the standard E10, I just can't make it go unless I get behind it and push myself.

And Vilsack confirmed that even if you can find a vehicle that runs on E85, you'll probably have a hard time finding a gas station that sells the fuel. But he's certain that if the U.S. military branches are able to commit to biofuels usage, this should help to turn the corner in the industry. Just got to get some major fuel users on board first.

Vilsack said the goal is to replace 36 billion gallons of fuel with ethanol and other biofuels produced in rural America. This would amount to roughly the 17 percent that the U.S. imports from the Middle East. He emphasized: "The President charged his cabinet with meeting this goal, and we are making great progress. It is a matter of national security." Ah, that buzz word again. (He's trying to make a point, I get it, but I think using a popular buzz word once in a presentation should be the limit, to avoid inevitable overkill.) President Obama's goal is to cut a third of imported oil over the next 10 years.

Overall, I think it's a good plan, but certainly not one that we haven't heard before. It's an echo from the Bush administration, or rather, perhaps a pacifier for impatient fuel consumers (that would make just about all of us, wouldn't it?). What I would really like to hear is remarks about the progress the U.S. making toward its renewable energy goals — what action are we taking? As frustrating as it is to watch the price at the fuel pump go up and up and up, I'm growing far more impatient with all the talk and no walk.



Rita BRHEL

Subsidy Scrutiny

Farm Subsidies Face Most Serious Threat Yet

BY DAVE HELLING

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Liberals and conservatives aiming to close trillion-dollar federal budget gaps may soon reach a rare consensus on a common target for spending cuts: The American farmer.

"Agriculture is clearly in the crosshairs for significant reductions," said Sen. Jerry Moran, a Kansas Republican and a longtime champion of farm interests in Washington.

The nation's creaking, decades-old system of farm subsidies, crop insurance, conservation programs and disaster relief is controversial even in good budget times.

But with federal deficits and debt at unheard-of levels, the \$10 billion to \$25 billion spent each year on farm supports is attracting new scrutiny from the right and the left.

And their budget-cutting scythes are out.

"Most people who do not directly benefit from farm subsidies seem to recognize that these programs have been an absolute failure and make virtually no economic sense," said Brian Riedl, an economist with the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

Liberal groups aren't any happier. Farm subsidies aren't needed, they argue, because farm income is going up, while some food prices — driven in part by federal support for ethanol production — are also higher, hurting families at the grocery store.

What's more, they point out that most federal spending for farmers actually goes to corporations, which don't need help, rather than family farms.

In Kansas, Tom Boehm, a farmer in Johnson County, said he understands why budget-cutters are looking at agriculture.

"We're taxpayers, too," Boehm acknowledged, but he noted that price supports provide a safety net when crops don't come in.

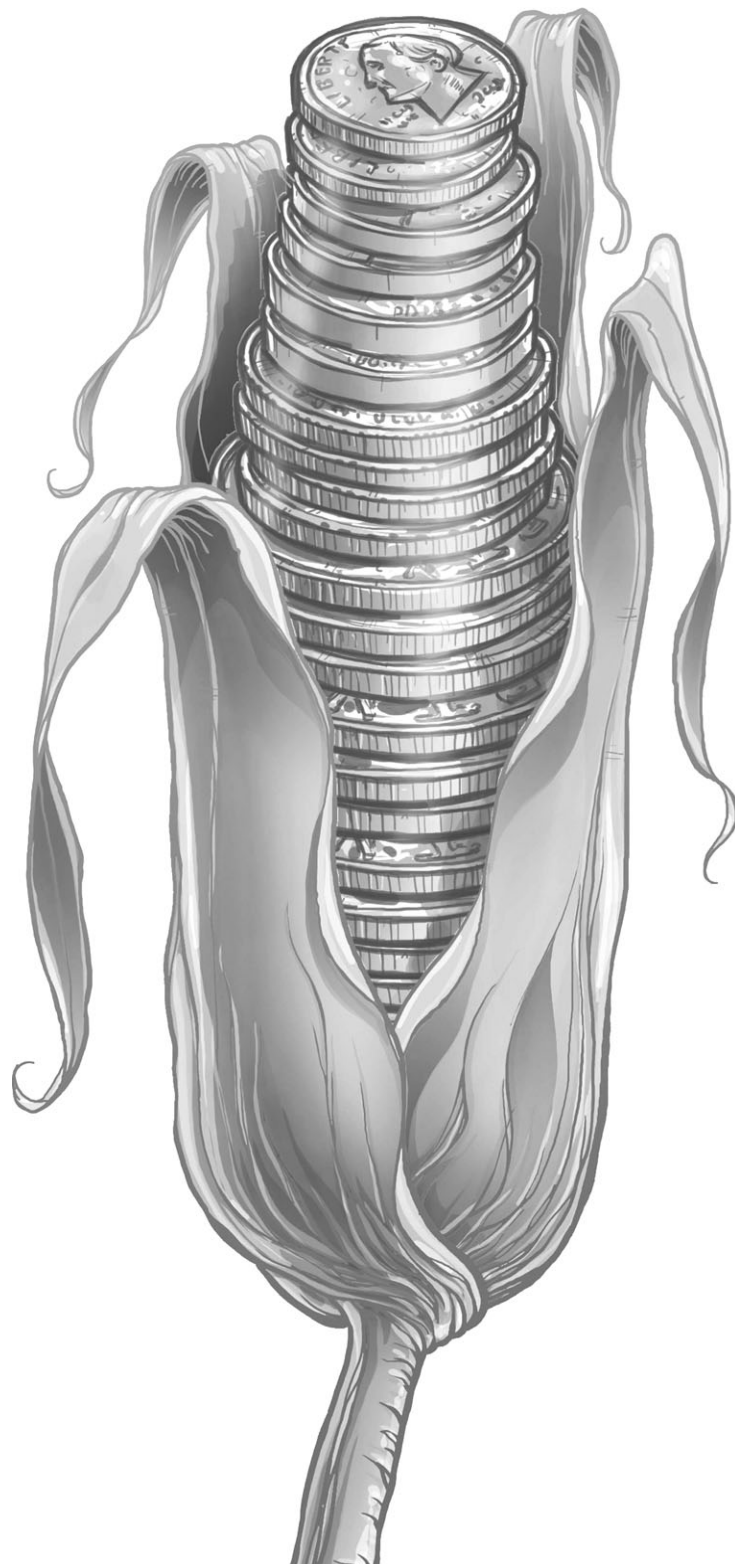
The federal government sends roughly \$5 billion annually in direct cash payments to farmers of 10 different crops such as wheat, corn, and rice, payments that are made regardless of crop prices. Other farm spending — loans, subsidized insurance, conservation incentives, disaster payments — can cost an additional \$5 billion to \$20 billion annually.

"Direct payments seem the least defensible," said David DeGennaro of the Environmental Working Group, a liberal organization long opposed to most farm spending. "It's just a cash handout for landowners and farmers, who get it whether they need it or not."

Farmers, and farm-state lawmakers, are nervously watching all the budget-cutting zeal. The farm bill, which establishes the broad outline for agriculture programs and spending, is tentatively up for renewal next year.

Farm advocates argue that while agriculture is ready to do its part to reduce the deficit, farm programs — cobbled together over many decades since the Great Depression — protect a system that delivers high-quality, safe food at a relatively low cost.

"Certainly agriculture is part of the (budget-cutting) mix," Moran said. "Most farmers are pretty con-



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servative when it comes to the federal government and spending, and they recognize that the debt is unsustainable. ... Having said that, there is plenty of evidence agriculture has given already, so we're looking for some fairness."

Indeed, some farmers contend federal payments provide an essential safety net for neighbors facing drought, floods, and near-record fuel prices, not to mention an inevitable downturn in the farm economy.

"This is a balloon," said Donn Teske, a farmer from Wheaton, Kan., and president of the Kansas Farmers Union. "I don't know how many balloons I've been through in my farming career. In two years we'll be at rock bottom again, and we'll all be going broke."

Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Missouri Democrat facing a tough reelection campaign, maintains that a rapid cut in taxpayer spending for agriculture could backfire, costing urban consumers more at the market.

"We pay very little for our food in this country compared to other nations," McCaskill said. "I don't want to get in a situation where all of a sudden people are seeing the same thing at the grocery store

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BRIAN RIEDL

years. Late last year, the Congressional Research Service projected a 24 percent jump in net farm income in 2010, based largely on export demand and higher prices.

As a result, farm household income — aided in part by money earned off the farm — exceeded the average non-farm household income by 17 percent in 2008, according to the Research Service.

Earlier this month, the Heritage Foundation proposed eliminating most farm support in exchange for tax-deductible farm savings accounts, which would allow farmers to bank income in better years to tide them over in poorer years.

"Farm subsidy reform has to be included in any real deficit reduction plan," said Riedl, the Heritage economist. "There's no reason Social Security and Medicare should be reformed, but (that) farmers should be let completely off the hook."

U.S. Rep. Sam Graves, whose 6th Congressional District in Missouri will soon represent nearly half of the state, said he's ready to battle for farm price supports — despite his recent vote for U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan's budget, which quietly cut \$30 billion in farm spending over a 10-year period.

"Every single producer would rather get a check from the market than the government," Graves said, but "simply eliminating these programs could put our ability to feed ourselves at risk."

"I agree that we need to look at reforms or ways we can be more efficient. The key is to strike the right balance between a safe food supply and fiscal responsibility."

Sen. Roy Blunt, a Missouri Republican, predicted that farmers will do their part to close the deficit gap, but other spending cuts need to be on the congressional carving table as well.

"I don't think all of the cuts need to come from rural communities and farm families," Blunt said. "And that's the only thing that appears to be on the board right now."

that they are at the gas pump."

Even with current farm programs that are in place, the price consumers pay for food is creeping up. The Agriculture Department projects food inflation this year will be between 3 and 4 percent, much higher than the 2010 food inflation rate of less than 1 percent.

And farm land values continue rising, leaving farmers as a group as well off as they've been in many

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