

TOP 10 Corn & Ethanol Myths

Quick Responses to Prevalent Falsehoods

In no particular order, here are some fast replies to often seen, but blatantly false, assertions about corn and ethanol.

1 There's not enough corn to go around.

There is not only enough corn for all demands – food, feed, fuel and fiber – but more than enough. Estimated U.S. corn surplus for 2007 (the amount left over after all needs are filled) is projected at 1.8 billion bushels, well above the 20-year average and is the fifth-highest level in the last two decades.

2 High corn demand is to blame for high food costs.

According to the latest research, corn and other raw food inputs, make up a small part of retail food prices: 19 cents or less for each dollar spent. Much more to blame is the rest of the tab, the so-called “marketing bill,” which includes packaging, transportation and all other cost factors. These are highly energy-dependent and much more tied to price inflation.

3 Increased corn production is bad for the environment.

Increased corn production means increased research and technology toward a more sustainable farm. Especially with biotechnology, new hybrid seeds mean a reduction in insecticide and herbicide use. And increased corn yields mean more efficiency when it comes to how much nitrogen, phosphate and potassium are used per bushel of corn grown. Modern tillage practices, including no-till farms, are becoming more prevalent and leading to less soil erosion.

4 Corn (especially high fructose corn syrup, or HFCS) is a cause of obesity.

Many factors contribute to the development of obesity, yet nutritionists, health experts and researchers generally agree that the chief cause is an imbalance between calories consumed and calories burned. According to the American Dietetic Association, “Obesity is a complex problem and its cause cannot be simply attributed to any one component of the food supply.” Further, the prevalence of obesity is increasing around the world, according to the International Obesity Task Force, even though use of HFCS outside of the United States is limited or nonexistent. In the end, personal responsibility and parental control of a child's diet is crucial.

5 The traditional family farm has been replaced by global corporations.

U.S. farms are diverse, ranging from small retirement and residential farms to enterprises with annual sales in the millions. Nevertheless, most U.S. farms—98 percent in 2004—are family farms. Family farms have accounted for a large majority of farm numbers and agricultural sales since the 1970s. But as production shifts to larger farms, family-owned farm businesses often become incorporated. Family corporations (having more than half the voting stock held by individuals related by blood or marriage) account for about one-fifth of farm sales.

6 Ethanol is bad for the environment.

Like oil refineries, ethanol plants are regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But even more important to consider is the fact that ethanol adds oxygen to gasoline—improving combustion and reducing toxic exhaust emissions. Adding ethanol to gasoline also dilutes the potency of these toxic chemicals—and greenhouse gas emissions. If we could increase ethanol to the target use of 15 billion gallons, we could see a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gases.

7 Increased corn acreage squeezes out other crops or natural open space.

From season to season, farmers shift their crops for a number of reasons. In 2007, increased corn acreage displaced 11.8 million acres of soybeans and 4.4 million acres of cotton. Despite claims that corn is displacing food crops, acreage of wheat and barley (directly used for food consumption) also increased this year. And there is absolutely no indication of “protected” lands being planted in corn.

8 Corn production and ethanol production waste water.

When it comes to corn, the crop is not nearly as water-intensive as other crops. Only about 13 percent of corn acreage was irrigated in 2006. And when one factors in the effects of evapotranspiration, an acre of corn gives off 4,000 gallons a day in water – more water than is used, in aggregate, by corn crop irrigation. And total crop irrigation (all crops, including corn) is tending downward. Likewise, water used in ethanol production is not wasted, but recycled in the process. An average-size ethanol plant (40 million gallons a year) uses as much water (about 330,000 gallons) as a municipal golf course – and provides more societal benefits.

9 Ethanol is not energy efficient.

Recent studies show the production of ethanol results in more energy than it takes to produce it. In June 2004, the U.S. Department of Agriculture updated its 2002 analysis of the issue and determined that the net energy balance of ethanol production is 1.67 to 1. (For every 100 BTUs of energy used to make ethanol, 167 BTUs of ethanol are produced.) The USDA findings have been confirmed by additional studies conducted by the University of Nebraska and Argonne National Laboratory.

10 Ethanol is bad for your car's engine.

Every major automaker in the world approves the use of E-10 Unleaded (10 percent ethanol/90 percent ordinary unleaded gasoline) under warranty. Ethanol adds two to three points of octane to gasoline, helping improve engine performance. Ethanol helps keep fuel injectors clean—and it lowers the levels of toxic exhaust emissions. And new research even shows that mid-level ethanol blends may improve fuel mileage.

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