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EDITORIAL

Sensible Rules for Ethanol

Despite pressure from farm state politicians, the Environmental Protection Agency has taken an important step to ensure that biofuels help rather than hurt the environment. Under new guidelines, biofuels produced at new facilities — including ethanol from corn, sugar, plants and other sources — must achieve at least a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions compared with conventional gasoline.

In 2007, Congress mandated a big increase in biofuel production (then 7 billion gallons, now closer to 12 billion) to 36 billion gallons in 2022, mainly to lessen the country's dependence on foreign oil. It also stipulated that the fuels be cleaner than gasoline, and handed the job of measuring emissions from various kinds of ethanol, and setting standards, to the E.P.A.

The agency promptly found itself under ferocious pressure from the corn lobby, which wanted its product shown in the best possible light, and environmental groups, which insisted on an accurate accounting. The most contentious issue was whether the agency should take into account not only direct emissions from ethanol — those associated with planting, refining and burning ethanol from corn or other feedstocks — but indirect emissions from land use changes.

Studies have shown that converting crops to fuel production in, say, Iowa, will cause farmers elsewhere in the world to clear virgin land to meet the demand for food, causing additional emissions. The studies found that because of these indirect effects most corn ethanol currently releases more greenhouse gases than petroleum fuels. The E.P.A. wisely chose to include land-use changes in their calculations.

The guidelines will not have an immediate impact on corn ethanol production since existing refineries and those under construction were grandfathered under the 2007 law. Going forward, however, the rules will almost certainly encourage less energy-intensive ways of making corn ethanol and, more important, advanced and next-generation biofuels from sources that do not displace food, including perennial grasses, crop wastes, and the cellulose in shrubs and plants.

The corn ethanol industry, which already enjoys generous and unnecessary subsidies, says, for the record, that it can live with the new rules. Even so, its Congressional allies threaten to deny the E.P.A. the money to carry them out. These efforts should be resisted.

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