

Bob Boehm: Farm, ethanol programs working Americans enjoy edge in agriculture and get to save at gas pump



I share Joe Drolett's concerns about pork-barrel politics (Viewpoints, April 29), but his idea of reforming federal farm programs won't "fix" the problem of rising food costs.

For years, the American taxpayer has been getting a good return on investment in farm programs in the form of safe, abundant and affordable food. So much so, that until recently most people did not give more than a passing thought to food expenditures, and they certainly didn't worry about having year-round access to adequate supplies of virtually any food item imaginable.

While consumers were enjoying the constant buffet of cheap food, public concern began shifting to environmental issues. In response, federal farm programs addressing conservation and erosion were developed during times of surplus food stocks and low commodity prices.

Given today's market forces, farmland in these environmental programs is now transitioning back into agricultural production using no-till or conservation tillage practices that allow the land to be productive while maintaining public environmental benefits. So, to counter Drolett's point, farm programs are working just as intended.

It's true new demand for corn for ethanol production plays a role in today's rising commodity prices, but it's not the sole or leading driver as Drolett suggests in his simplistic explanation.

We live in a global economy where a "perfect storm" of factors have collided. They include new demand from developing countries for everything from steel to energy to food; the falling value of the U.S. dollar, making our commodities more affordable overseas as evidenced by record exports and a trade surplus in agriculture; more investments in commodity markets as a "hedge" against inflation; along with adverse weather events in key production areas around the world.

I share Drolett's frustration with roadblocks to solutions, but without an expansion of our energy supplies, America will continue to watch gas prices escalate. Consider where we'd be today without ethanol.

A recent Iowa State University report on the impact of ethanol on gasoline prices estimated a savings of 39 cents per gallon in the Midwest, meaning without ethanol, consumers would be paying more than \$4 per gallon already. Applying an average savings of 25 cents per gallon to the 147 billion gallons of gas annually consumed in the United States, equates to a return on the ethanol investment of more than \$36 billion in savings at the pump.

Corn ethanol may not be the final solution, but it's a solid first step toward breaking our reliance on imported oil from OPEC. Beyond ethanol, more oil drilling, along with more liquid natural gas import facilities, and more wind, solar, clean coal and nuclear powered energy generation capacity offer additional opportunities.

We need to support home-grown agriculture rather than sending billions for oil overseas to people who, in many cases, wish us harm, because it is only through the productivity of farmers that we are going to work our way back out of this current supply and demand situation.

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