Focus on Biofuels Is Key to Renewable Energy Success | Commentary

By Byron Dorgan

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I've always known where President Barack Obama stood on the issue of renewable fuels. He has consistently voiced his strong support going back to his days in the Senate, and he has continued that support in the White House. In a speech at an advanced biofuel refinery in Missouri on April 28, 2010, he summed up his position like this:

"I've said before I don't accept second place for the United States of America. I want us to be first in wind power, first in solar power, and I want us to be first when it comes to biodiesel and the technologies that are being developed [here]."

The president's remarks that day showed the vision and competitive fire that I witnessed while working alongside him in the Senate. And as an original writer of the Renewable Fuel Standard, I always appreciated the president's unwavering support for it.

But today, I'm concerned about the administration's recent proposal that would put an end to the growth of this emerging American energy industry. The EPA proposal, if left unchanged, would signal a retreat on our bipartisan commitment to developing a strong renewable fuels industry to reduce our dependence on foreign oil, create jobs and reduce harmful emissions.

This proposal simply doesn't fit with the president's goals. Take biodiesel as an example. It is a significant RFS success story — the first EPA-designated advanced biofuel to reach nationwide, commercial-scale production. The EPA says it reduces greenhouse gas emissions by 57 percent to 86 percent, and the White House's recent report on climate change cited incentives for biodiesel as an example of federal mitigation. Biodiesel is produced at refineries in almost every state in the country and has steadily grown the past few years using an increasing variety of resources such as animal fats, soybean oil and recycled cooking oil.

Yet under the EPA's proposal, biodiesel production could be cut sharply from last year's record production of nearly 1.8 billion gallons, down to 1.28 billion gallons. This makes no sense, and it's threatening a clear success story in the advanced biofuels sector.

Why are we walking away from success? And how are we going to be "first when it comes to biodiesel" if we cut RFS volumes below demonstrated capacity?

Sure, the critics have grown louder. But they are wrong.

I represented a major oil state in Congress and strongly support the new oil and gas production that is transforming our energy future.

But that success doesn't mean we should give up on diversifying our fuel sources. Producing renewable fuels makes us more energy secure while delivering significant environmental and economic benefits.

And let's be clear about prices: Blaming the RFS for high gas prices is like blaming the rooster for the sunrise. Fuel prices have been rising for decades, and Americans clearly understand that the real cause is our lack of choice and competition. There is no free market in the fuels sector, and prices are heavily manipulated by global cartels such as OPEC.

The RFS is designed to change that, and it's working.

The EPA's proposal has already been costly, drying up investment and forcing producers to scale back. It's time for the administration to make the adjustments necessary to restore confidence among investors, entrepreneurs and thousands of employees in the renewable fuels industry that the United States will do what it takes to be first. As Obama said a few years ago, let's not settle for second place.

Byron Dorgan was a Democratic senator from North Dakota from 1992 to 2011. He now is a policy adviser at Arent Fox, whose clients include the National Biodiesel Board, and is co-chairman of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Energy Project.