EPA: Right on ethanol, but wrong on other biofuels

By Silvestre Reyes, former Rep. (D-Texas)
Jan. 7, 2014

Serving as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee for four years was one of the most rewarding experiences I had in Congress. In my role as chairman, I had a front-row seat to the most serious threats that faced this nation and what the intelligence and military branches of government were doing to confront those challenges.

While much of what I learned remains classified, I am not revealing any state secrets by saying that our addiction to foreign sources of oil is a serious concern for our national security.

Even with that in mind, the recent proposal by the Environmental Protection Agency to reduce the amount of ethanol in our fuel supply is the right decision.

Ethanol is a mature industry that has grown so quickly there are concerns about damage to engines when it is used in higher blends. Also, because U.S. ethanol continues to rely almost entirely on corn for production, it has limited environmental benefits and creates impacts on livestock producers that are of grave concern in Texas.

Where the EPA got it wrong, however, was in the decision to propose reducing the amount of biodiesel and other advanced biofuels in our nation's fuel supply next year. By most estimates, the EPA is proposing to cut the amount of biodiesel production next year by at least 25 percent.

Unlike ethanol made from corn, biodiesel is an EPA-certified advanced biofuel that's made from a wide variety of renewable fats and oils. This means that it burns cleaner than diesel made from petroleum, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50 percent.

Understandably, biodiesel producers across the United States are perplexed by the EPA's recent proposal, which could decimate their industry and force dozens of companies to close their doors, particularly small businesses. This includes Texas, which is well known as an oil-patch state but is less known for being home to at least a dozen biodiesel companies that are creating jobs and economic activity from Austin to the ports in the Gulf.

Biodiesel producers were particularly stunned by the EPA's decision because the White House has for years proclaimed advanced biofuels like biodiesel as critical components of helping this nation end its addiction to foreign sources of oil. In fact, in 2011 the White House released a

report called the “Blueprint for a Secure Energy Future,” which included using biodiesel to make our nation’s energy supply more secure.

The White House had it right then. It is impossible to account for the costs our nation has borne in blood and treasure due to our dependence on foreign energy, particularly in the transportation fuel market. Our economy is in constant danger of being disrupted or undermined at the whim of foreign dictators who don’t have our interests at heart. And we have for decades invested trillions of dollars in protecting our strategic energy interests overseas. By producing fuels at home, we reduce those risks and those costs.

With the right policies in place, we can do so in a cost-competitive way. Just this year, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus told the House Armed Services Committee that the Navy bought enough biodiesel over the 2012-2013 heating season to save one Naval facility $30,000. If this program was expanded, the armed forces could save millions of dollars a year on fuel costs — money that could instead be used to better train and equip our fighting men and women.

Lastly, we cannot forget that the impacts of climate change caused by the production of man-made greenhouse gasses are a serious threat to global stability and security. Floods, droughts and hurricanes are all impacted by climate change and can dangerously destabilize volatile regions. Any steps our nation can take — like blending biodiesel into our fuel supply — to ensure the fuels we burn are both clean and sustainable are steps toward reducing tensions around the world and even reducing our military footprint in the Middle East.

It is my sincere hope that the White House will intervene on behalf of the biodiesel industry and ensure that the EPA’s proposal to cut biodiesel is dramatically modified. If anything, this country should be using more advanced biofuels like biodiesel, not less. Our national security depends on getting these types of decisions right. Let’s hope the EPA doesn’t get it wrong.

Reyes represented Texas’s 16th Congressional District from 1997 to 2013.