One-way fares as low as $69 Get them before they're gone. SOUTHWEST.COM Book Now

Springfield, Ill., State Journal-Register

EPA BIODIESEL PROPOSAL THREATENS ILLINOIS JOBS, RENEWABLE FUELS INDUSTRY

By Bill Wykes
Feb. 13, 2014

While still a U.S. Senator from the state of Illinois, one of Barack Obama's greatest achievements was the 2006 introduction of legislation that would become the Alternative Diesel Standard. Recognizing the need to diversify America's fuel options, the proposal called for including incremental volumes of biodiesel into the country's diesel distribution streams.

"For all of our military might and economic dominance, the Achilles' heel of the most powerful country on Earth is still the oil we cannot live without," Obama said at the time.

He was right then and his words ring every bit as true today.

How ironic is it then that it is now President Obama's Environmental Protection Agency that has proposed an inexplicable retreat on the gains biodiesel and other renewable fuels have made in displacing billions of gallons of petroleum.

So how did we get here from there? In 2007, the Alternative Diesel Standard was essentially folded into the Renewable Fuels Standard, a program launched in 2005 that had the similar goal of displacing gasoline with domestic renewable fuels.

And a funny thing happened. It worked. Over the years, biodiesel and other renewable have been gradually gaining market share on the monopoly the oil industry has held for more than 100 years. As you would expect, this was not a welcomed development by the domestic petroleum industry or the international cartel known as OPEC.

So after untold millions of dollars spent on lobbying against the RFS, the EPA last November reversed course and proposed slashing the volume requirements for renewables. For the biodiesel producers, their effective market would be cut in half.

If the Obama Administration signs off on the proposal, the reduction would result in the loss of thousands of jobs nationally. It could be particularly devastating for the biodiesel industry in Illinois, which supports more than 5,600 jobs and nearly $240 million in wages. All told, the industry provides a $2.2 billion boost to the state economy.

Biodiesel is produced from a wide range of co-products and waste-products, including soybean oil, livestock fats and recycled cooking oil. Since 2007, biodiesel production has grown to more than 1.7 billion gallons last year. The fuel, the nation's first commercially available advanced biofuel, represents almost five percent of the country's on-road diesel fuel market.

As a result of its 86 percent carbon reductions, biodiesel use in the U.S. since 2005 has cut lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions by more than 56 billion pounds, the same effect of removing five million passenger vehicles from our roadways.

Yet, as strong as the industry has performed – with the help of the RFS – the oil industry has never let up in its pursuit of dealing a lethal blow to renewables. The oil industry's self-interest is evident, but it cannot be allowed to supersede the interests of Illinois and the nation overall.

In Illinois, we want our renewable fuels industry to thrive, because we know it is of particular help to rural communities in a state whose employment rate significantly lags the rest of the country. Our economy and diversifying America's transportation fuels remain two of our top priorities. A policy that would damage both should be more than ill-advised; it should be unthinkable.

Wykes is an avid biodiesel user in both his passenger vehicle and farm equipment in Yorkville. He is also past Chairman of the Illinois Soybean Board.