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Ethanol refineries run into backlash

By Scott Bauer

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Ethanol, whose fortunes as a gasoline additive have risen and fallen with the price of oil, is in the middle of a boom. Biofuel plants are sprouting up across the Midwest, and corn farmers are rushing to cash in. But this agricultural gold rush carries many questions, not the least of which centers on demand. This is the first of two stories on America's ethanol wave.

DOVER, Wis. — Barney Lavin ought to be the poster child for ethanol.

A fifth-generation corn farmer, working the land his family homesteaded in 1842, Lavin should see dollar signs over a proposed ethanol plant in this small southeastern Wisconsin town.

Instead, Lavin put down his pitchfork and picked up his cell phone, joining the ranks of other unlikely opponents organizing against ethanol plants, fearing air pollution, increased traffic and groundwater depletion.

"I'm unwilling to give up the obvious quality of life we have here for some added income," said Lavin, who grows corn on a 300-acre farm on rolling hills that include a recently restored wetlands. "We feel very strongly about this area and we don't want it ruined."

Across the corn belt and beyond — from Minnesota to Missouri, Illinois to Pennsylvania, Kansas to Indiana — residents in areas targeted for ethanol plants are refusing to go along with politicians who say it is a more sustainable alternative to foreign oil and a way to save dying Main Streets.

There are 115 ethanol plants operating in the U.S. — most of them are in Midwest states including top producers Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois and Minnesota. Another 79 are under construction or planned, according to the Renewable Fuels Association, a trade group.

Debbie Krogh lives next door to one of two proposed sites for the Dover plant.

"I can't tell you how sad this has actually made me," Krogh said. "We have had to fight for our lives here."

In most places, ethanol plants are welcomed, said Robert Dinneen, Renewable Fuels Association president.

According to the association, the ethanol industry created more than 153,000 jobs as of 2005 and boosted U.S. household income by \$5.7 billion. The association also said ethanol-industry operations and spending for new construction added \$1.9 billion in federal tax

Ethanol, for and against

WHO WANTS THEM: Ethanol plants are strongly supported by politicians from President Bush down to local town board members. They view the plants as a way to revive ailing rural economies while providing an alternative fuel source to gasoline made from foreign crude oil.

WHO OPPOSES THEM: Farmers, environmentalists and others are organizing across the country to fight ethanol plants in their communities, arguing that they pollute the air, increase truck traffic, deplete water resources and pose a safety risk.

WHAT'S NEXT: Opponents have had successes in keeping plants from operating in some communities, but the ethanol industry continues to grow nationwide, with 115 plants operating and 79 planned or under construction.

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On the Net

Wisconsin Ethanol Coalition:
www.wisconsinethanol.com

Energy Justice Network:
www.energyjustice.net

Renewable Fuels Association:
www.ethanolrfa.org

"An ethanol refinery is a fuel refinery. And I don't believe that fuel refineries belong in backyards."

revenue and \$1.6 billion for state and local governments.

Lisa Glon, opponent of Indiana ethanol refinery

When ethanol plants are properly sited, and the benefits explained, opposition disappears, said Josh Morby, executive director of the Wisconsin Bio Industry Alliance, a group consisting primarily of businesses and labor organizations that benefit from increased ethanol production.

"Those of us in the industry are excited and encouraged by the technology and developments that are taking place, but it's important to remember the average citizen still doesn't know what ethanol is, where to get it, or the benefits of ethanol," Morby said.

Lack of community support was one reason South Dakota-based VeraSun Energy Corp. backed out of plans in March to build an ethanol plant in Milford, Ind., population 1,500. Residents argued the proposed location was dangerous, would increase truck traffic and posed a threat to the environment and quality of life.

In South Dakota, Davison County officials want an ethanol company to help pay for \$2 million in road repairs blamed on increased truck traffic. In Illinois, a citizens' group filed a federal lawsuit to block further construction of an ethanol plant, and there are ethanol-plant challenges elsewhere across the Midwest.

Lisa Glon, a 39-year-old stay-at-home mom, said she and other opponents thought the Indiana plant would be too close to residents and a school.

"We never took a stand against ethanol production," she said. "We simply said this site was bad. An ethanol refinery is a fuel refinery. And I don't believe that fuel refineries belong in backyards."

Ethanol is alcohol made from plants, usually corn, and it is blended with fuel to make it burn cleaner. In the process, pollution-causing chemicals and compounds are emitted along with a smell that supporters liken to popcorn but critics compare to manure.

Ethanol can help rural communities, said Chuck Hasebrook, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs, a nonprofit farm advocacy group in Lyons, Neb. But he said policymakers must address the impact of ethanol facilities on the environment and dangers of overproduction.

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