

Give ethanol mandate a green light

This year's surge in gasoline prices was a reminder that America's energy policies have failed to promote the development of alternative fuels with the urgency needed.

Wisconsin has an opportunity to start correcting that failure by jump-starting the use and production of ethanol, an alcohol fuel that in the United States is made chiefly from corn, a home-grown crop.

The state Legislature should take advantage of that opportunity by requiring that most gasoline in Wisconsin be blended with ethanol to produce E10, a fuel that is 10 percent ethanol.

By increasing the demand for ethanol, the E10 proposal has the potential to expand ethanol production in Wisconsin, creating jobs and income. E10 also shows promise for reducing the pump price for consumers, and it can enhance energy security by developing renewable energy to cut our dependence on imported oil.

Supporters of E10, which would affect regular-grade gasoline only, campaigned for the proposal early this year. At that time, we noted ethanol's benefits but urged lawmakers to set the proposal aside until further information was available on ethanol's impact on air pollution.

The further information is now in, resolving doubts. There is no longer reason for delay.

The state Department of Natural Resources studied the effect E10 would have on the type of air pollution known as ozone. The department found no reason to oppose E10.

Ethanol is in some ways a cleaner burning fuel than gasoline. For example, gasoline sold in southeastern Wisconsin contains ethanol in a specially reformulated mixture that reduces air pollution to comply with the federal Clean Air Act. But ethanol also produces more of the emissions that contribute to ozone, a problem in eastern Wisconsin, which already fails to meet a federal ozone standard.

The DNR study found that while E10 would contribute to ozone, the impact could be offset through pollution control strategies that the state would have to implement anyway to comply with federal law.

Wisconsin should help jump-start the alternative fuel industry by requiring that regular-grade gas contain 10 percent ethanol.

Ethanol has previously answered other questions about its use in motor fuel.

Doesn't ethanol require more energy to produce than it yields? No. The consensus of research at places like the Argonne National Laboratory and the Colorado School of Mines has concluded that corn ethanol yields 1.2 to 1.6 times as much energy as is needed to produce it.

Doesn't ethanol reduce gas mileage? Estimates show mileage on E10 is about 1.5 percent lower than on regular gasoline. However, when the lower cost of E10 is considered — 5 percent to 10 percent under regular gasoline — drivers come out ahead.

Isn't ethanol's lower cost the result of government subsidies? The federal government provides a 50-cents-per-gallon subsidy for ethanol, and states, including Wisconsin, provide lesser subsidies. Ethanol's subsidies still pale in comparison to the oil industry's tax benefits, which include the oil depletion allowance and drilling cost deduction.

Why not allow the free market to support ethanol without an E10 mandate? Virtually all of Wisconsin's gasoline stations are controlled by oil companies, which profit from gasoline. Consequently, they have no motivation to offer E10 without a state requirement. Government should use caution with mandates in the marketplace. But in this case the common good to be gained far outweighs the disadvantages.

Wisconsin's E10 proposal, which has the support of Gov. Jim Doyle, can still use some modification. For example, an amendment should be added to prohibit E10 for off-road vehicles and in portable fuel containers, where evaporation can increase pollution.

But after some compromise, Wisconsin should join Minnesota, Hawaii and Montana in adopting an E10 standard to boost the economy and the nation's energy self-sufficiency.