

Local producer touts value of corn usage in ethanol

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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McPheeters doesn't agree with AP story.

Gothenburg area farmer Scott McPheeters isn't buying what a recent story says about the harmful environmental effects of corn production and ethanol.

An Associated Press article described corn farmers as plowing into pristine prairies and converting grassland into cropland. It also criticized the increased use of corn for fuel instead of food.

McPheeters, who is on the board of managers for the farmer-owned KAAPPA Ethanol plant near Minden, pointed to Renewable Fuels Association data that shows an increase of corn acres in 2012 and 2013 achieved through crop switching and not through cultivation of untouched prairie.

Although fewer acres exist in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) today, he said acres have increased in other conservation programs.

As far as the release of carbon dioxide (CO₂) during the fermentation process, McPheeters said that CO₂ is utilized by corn plants during the growing season to produce more corn and other types of vegetation.

"And the harm caused by burning fossil fuels is much more than the inputs we use in growing corn," he explained.

In addition, McPheeters said the use of corn ethanol reduces greenhouse gas emissions by

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34% compared to gasoline—a figure shared by the Argonne National Laboratory.

Responding to what the article said about corn requiring large amounts of fertilizer and other inputs that destroy native plants and wildlife habitat, McPheeters said producers use fewer inputs today.

He noted that the main input to growing corn is sunlight which is converted to starch during the fermentation process.

“The bottom line is that we’re much more efficient,” he said. “Even if we’re growing more bushels, we’re using fewer resources doing it and getting more back.”

McPheeters said one acre of corn that produces 200 bushels will provide 540 gallons of fuel to drive a car 10,800 miles with nearly two tons of livestock feed left over.

One issue many people hear about is that ethanol production uses a lot of water.

He shared water usage comparison, pointing out that an ethanol plant in Nebraska uses the same amount of water each year as keeping a golf course green for a year or running one center pivot during a growing season.

“Corn, and its by products, feed livestock which, in turn, feed people,” he said. “Other by products can be used to make plastic and other things used in manufacturing,” he said.

He said much of the water used by ethanol plants—about 600 gallons a minute—is returned to the atmosphere and also goes into distillers grain for livestock.

“Animals drink less water because there’s a lot of it in distillers grain,” McPheeters said.

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Corn-based distillers grains, manufactured through the ethanol-manufacturing industry, are sold as a high-protein livestock feed

On a trip to Washington D.C. with ethanol industry officials, he said one congressional representative noted that the United States has never sent a military presence to the plains to protect fields where corn is raised.

Yet, McPheeters said billions of dollars are spent protecting U.S. oil interests overseas and the United States expends more than a billion a day to buy foreign oil.

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