

## Biofuels Backgrounder

### Food, Fuel & Catholic Social Teaching

Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have attempted to harness and use energy in creative and ever more inventive ways. Today, in response to skyrocketing oil prices, the need to lessen dependence on foreign oil supplies, and the rapid depletion of fossil fuel sources like coal, natural gas and oil, people have been turning to biofuels as a new source of renewable energy.

Biofuels are fuels derived from biological or plant material such as corn or soybeans, and are seen by many as the answer to rising oil prices and global warming.

The drive to find alternative energy sources is a positive development and one that many agree is necessary and essential. However, decisions about which alternative sources to use as well as how those resources are to be used raises ethical questions when examined within the scope of the needs of people struggling for food security.

In light of growing food scarcity, environmental sustainability questions and skyrocketing food prices globally, decisions over the use of agricultural commodities that are also food staples must be examined within the framework of the impact on people struggling to survive.

Placing human beings at the center of these questions is at the heart of Catholic social teaching.



Photograph: Charlie Neibergall/AP

A handful of corn before it is processed.

And in addition to looking at questions of human flourishing, sustainability and climate change a deeper analysis and discussion of the patterns of human consumption must also be explored.

Consumption patterns and energy use must not only be balanced in light of the sustainable limits of the earth's resources, but must be questioned and reduced. Reducing consumption and cutting back on energy use must also be part of the structural change necessary to meet the energy needs of all.

#### Legislative Incentives & Biofuels

In 2005, the United States Congress passed The Energy Policy Act of 2005. Provisions of this piece of legislation began to require the widespread use of ethanol in motor fuels.

This law provided incentives to farmers in the form of subsidies to target a percentage of the crop for use in ethanol as opposed to food. And here begins the controversy. The corn normally used for food (or corn used for animal feed that would eventually become food) was being diverted to use for fuel. The food vs. fuel debate is at the center of the controversy on this topic.

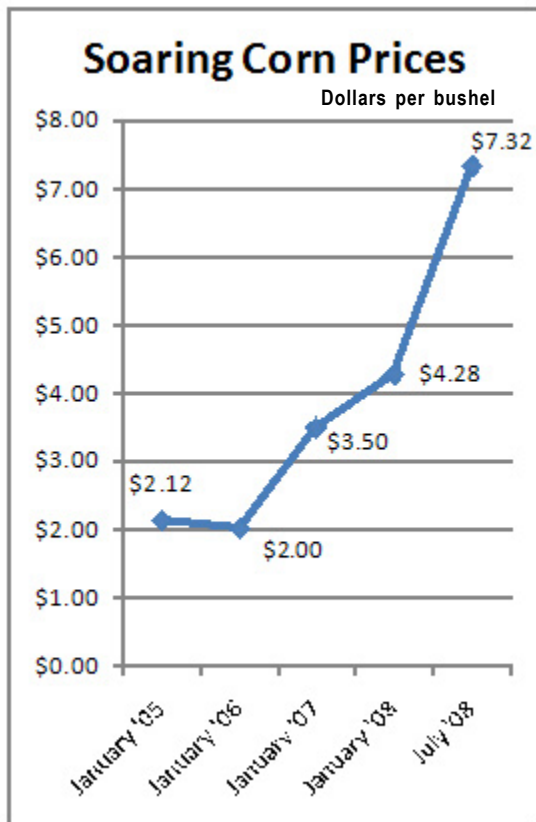
Rising fuel and food prices joined with falling incomes means that empty stomachs are competing with empty gas tanks.



Photograph: Br. Bill Griffin



*Rising fuel and food prices joined with falling incomes means that empty stomachs are competing with empty gas tanks.*



Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service

## Biofuels and the Food Crisis

In 2007-2008, food prices doubled and tripled worldwide and created a food crisis which some blame on the huge increase at the same time in biofuel production. As cities erupted in riots from people protesting their inability to buy and/or access enough food to live on, people around the world challenged the ethics of using grain and productive farmland to make a fuel additive instead of producing food for millions of hungry or starving people.

Many developed countries like the U.S. have begun subsidizing the production of biofuels creating an incentive to reduce the amount of land used to grow food while diverting land use to grow crops for fuel production. Many blame the increase in food prices to this dynamic. A recent report published by the World Bank in July, 2008 claims that the push to grow crops for energy is responsible for 75% of the rise in global food prices.

## Biofuel Industry Denies Responsibility; Food Crisis Worsens

The biofuel industry denies responsibility for the underlying factors creating spikes in food and fuel costs. The biofuel industry blames instead changing weather patterns, stock market speculators and the growing demand for grains from rapidly developing countries with new middle-class life-styles such as China and India.

The biofuel industry also blamed the food crisis on governments who imposed moratoriums on grain exports to secure their own food supply amid the crisis. The food crisis continues to worsen with more and more people suffering from hunger and starvation, an estimated 750,000 dying from malnutrition and its related diseases each month.

## A Call for the Common Good

In balancing the needs of human hunger, climate change and energy demands, pointing fingers and laying blame will not resolve the urgent realities that currently confront the human community. What is needed is an integrated approach that analyzes the root causes and the structural policies that create undue suffering. What is needed is the formulation of policies that recognize and place the value of the human person at their center. Pope Benedict XVI noted recently in his address to the U.N. Food Summit, "Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world which has, in fact, levels of production, resources and knowledge sufficient to put an end to such dramas and their consequences. The great challenge of today is to 'globalize,' not just economic and commercial interests, but also the call for solidarity, while respecting and taking advantage of the contribution of all components of society." ■

