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## Steve Calvin: Ethanol costly in more ways than one

**Steve Calvin**

Published 01/24/2003

Gov. Tim Pawlenty's proposal to cut state ethanol subsidies looks like the political equivalent of throwing a lighted match into a barrel of the highly flammable liquid.irate farmers crowded into the State Capitol last week and rural legislators -- many of them Republicans -- fell over one another in the rush to promise their continued support for the state funding.

Political analysts warn that the governor is in for a painful lesson about the impossibility of making the cuts necessary to balance the budget without raising taxes. After all, this is only the initial round of trimming and there is a deficit of nearly \$5 billion staring him in the face.

However, Pawlenty just smiled and said, "This controversy is small compared to what we will face. You haven't seen anything yet." Fortunately for Minnesota, he is a political realist who sees this budget crisis as a gigantic challenge and opportunity all rolled into one knotted mess. The debate over the ethanol subsidy is a perfect place to start the untangling process.

Ethanol made from large-scale corn cropping is about as close to being a renewable resource as World Wrestling Federation wrestling is to being an Olympic event. On second thought, the high-powered PR machine now touting ethanol could probably persuade the Olympics to add some feather boas to the Greco-Roman event.

Ethanol and so-called "bio-fuels" are grown using large amounts of fossil fuel in all aspects of their production. The states and the federal government are not only subsidizing the production of this boondoggle, but we are all forced by law to buy ethanol as a gasoline additive. It would be funny if it were not so expensive -- and so damaging to the long-term economic health of Greater Minnesota.

Ethanol supporters at the Capitol last week avoided using the term "subsidy." It has obviously become a dirty word. Most just demanded a restoration of the cuts and warned of economic disaster if the funding were not restored. No one denies the plight of rural Minnesota, but one of the opportunities of this debate is that its outcome will redirect the considerable energies and talents of the farmers who now see ethanol as their only option.

Most Minnesotans are supportive of rural development, but only when it is financially and environmentally sustainable. Without government aid and mandates, ethanol is neither. But there are alternatives. The growing number of Minnesota farmers raising cattle and sheep on pasture are demonstrating what real renewable energy is all about. And they are doing it without public subsidies. For seven months a year, productive pastures collect solar energy and produce high-energy animal feed. This feed is harvested by ruminant animals -- turning it into milk, meat and wool.

I think that Gov. Pawlenty is on the right track. He may not make the cuts stick on this

round, but ethanol has already lost its luster. The cuts to come will be painful, yet agriculture will survive without ethanol subsidies. We cannot avoid the important debates over this issue and many others -- even though they are sure to provide political pyrotechnics.

*-- Steve Calvin, of Minneapolis, is a physician and farmer.*

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