

[DEMAND ACTION NOW >](#)

Deroy Murdock

NRO Contributing Editor

April 24, 2008, 4:00 a.m.



Global Food Riots

Made in Washington, D.C.

By Deroy Murdock

To draw a phrase from the late, great William F. Buckley Jr.'s words as he founded *National Review*, someone must stand athwart the federal ethanol program yelling, "Stop!" The emergency brake should be pulled — NOW — before ethanol wreaks further havoc.

Poor Haitians rioted last week outside Port-au-Prince's presidential palace, forcing Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis's April 12 ouster. Haitians are sick and tired of food prices that are 40 percent higher than last summer's. Some have resorted to eating cookies made of salt, vegetable oil, and dirt. That's right: Dirt cookies.

Developing-world denizens are taking it to the streets with growling stomachs. In Bob Marley's words, "A hungry man is an angry man."

Climbing corn prices have ignited Mexican tortilla riots. Enraged citizens in Egypt and Pakistan — potential Muslim powder kegs — have also violently protested premium prices for basic staples. Similar instability has erupted from the Ivory Coast to Indonesia. Resurrecting the defeated "import substitution" model of yore, India and Vietnam are among the nations that lately have prohibited grain exports and imposed government price controls. Kazakhstan, Earth's No. 5 wheat source, just halted wheat exports, hoping to hoard local supplies. One third of the global wheat market is now closed.

High oil prices and growing global food demand fan these flames, but government lit the match. Atop the European Union's biofuels mandate (5.75 percent of gasoline and diesel by 2010; 10 percent expected in 2020), America's 51-cent-per-gallon ethanol tax subsidy (2007 cost: \$8 billion) and Congress' 7.5-billion-gallon annual production quota (rising to 36 billion in 2022, including 15 billion from corn) have turned corn farms into cash cows. Diverting one quarter of U.S. corn to motors rather than to mouths has boosted prices 74 percent in a year.

Eager to ride the ethanol gravy train, wheat and soybean farmers increasingly switch to corn. Thus, hard wheat is up 86 percent, while soybeans cost 93 percent more. Since April 15, 2007, pricier, grain-based animal feed (which consumed 40 percent of 2007's 13 billion bushel U.S. corn crop) has helped hike eggs 46 percent. Got milk? You paid 26 percent more. Conversely, meat prices have dropped, as farmers slaughter animals rather than pay so much to feed them. (For details, click here.)

All this has triggered a race to the top of the grain silo. On April 9, "the World Bank estimated global food prices have risen 83 percent over the past three years, threatening recent strides in poverty reduction," the *Wall Street*

Journal noted the next day. “As crops are sold for alternative-energy production, food prices have soared: The price of rice, the staple for billions of Asians, is up 147 percent over the past year.”

As ReasonOnline’s Ronald Bailey observed April 8, “the result of these mandates is that about 100 million tons of grain will be transformed this year into fuel, drawing down global grain stocks to their lowest levels in decades. Keep in mind that 100 million tons of grain is enough to feed nearly 450 million people for a year” — assuming 1.2 pounds of grain each, daily.

In short, car engines are burning the crops that feed a half-billion people. That has to hurt.

“There is growing consensus that we need urgently to examine the impact on food prices of different kinds and production methods of biofuels, and ensure that their use is responsible and sustainable,” British Prime Minister Gordon Brown wrote Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda April 10, urging discussion of the issue at July’s G8 Summit in Hokkaido. “Rising food prices threaten to roll back progress we have made in recent years on development. For the first time in decades, the number of people facing hunger is growing,” Brown added.

President Bush announced April 14 that the U.S. would provide \$200 million in nutritional aid to poor countries ripped by such unrest. This may feed starving rioters, but it perversely requires that Uncle Sam allocate fresh taxpayer money to scour the mess he created by spending \$8 billion in ethanol subsidies.

This is like buying a new hangover cure every morning after closing a new bar every night.

If this keeps up, President Bush may have to direct some of that food to a Western Hemisphere nation called the United States of America.

As shocking as it sounds, *The New York Sun* reported Monday that the global rice shortage has struck home. American citizens have begun to experience *food rationing* in our rich, blessed country.

“Due to the limited availability of rice, we are limiting rice purchases based on your prior purchasing history,” read a sign above a shrinking rice supply at a Mountain View, California Costco store. Each customer was limited to one bag of rice. A shopper who tried to buy two bags found one of them pried from his hands and thrown back on the store shelves, in something akin to Cuban-style egalitarianism. While such scenes have yet to erupt nationwide, the *Sun* found that limited stocks of rice, flour, and cooking oil are causing purchase limits and hoarding by consumers trying to lock in today’s high prices (fearing even higher future prices) or simply to acquire products that soon may be unavailable.

But wait. There’s more.

It would be bad enough if this human suffering and geopolitical strife were ethanol’s ransom for dramatic environmental progress. In fact, ethanol is Earth-hostile.

- According to the Hoover Institution’s Henry Miller and University of California Davis professor Colin Carter, “ethanol yields about 30 percent less energy per gallon than gasoline, so miles per gallon in internal combustion engines drops significantly.”
- It takes three to six gallons of water to grow the corn for one gallon of ethanol, thus draining rivers and reservoirs.
- As farmers turn forests into corn fields, they expend energy uprooting trees that produce oxygen, absorb

CO₂, and store carbon. Princeton University researchers calculate that this ethanol-driven arboricide has spawned a “carbon debt” that already will take 167 years to reverse.

As Princeton’s Tim Searchinger said in the February 8 *Washington Post*, “We can’t get to a result, no matter how heroically we make assumptions on behalf of corn ethanol, where it will actually generate greenhouse-gas benefits.”

- Meanwhile, tree killing consumes wildlife habitat. Orangutans now are in jeopardy as their surroundings fall to new, ethanol-inspired palm-oil plantations.

- Nitrogen fertilizer, common in corn cultivation, yields nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas — which is no laughing matter. As Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen and his scientific team concluded in *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* last August 1, “the relatively large emission of N₂O exacerbates the already huge challenge of getting global warming under control.”

- Unless superior substitutes emerge, obeying Congress’ 2022 diktat will require a corn crop equal to 115 percent of 2007’s U.S. output, with *every* kernel going to ethanol, none for food. The consequences would be calamitous — from movies without popcorn, to over-farmed and under-rotated fields, to growing global starvation.

It gets worse.

As Eric Peters explained in the March 3 *American Spectator*, ethanol is simply ethyl alcohol. Unfortunately, “Alcohol fuels may constitute a new type of fire hazard because they are harder to extinguish than gasoline fires and require new types of fire-extinguishing equipment and training.” Peters added:

The fires are extremely hot, and the flames invisible. . . . Foams designed to combat alcohol fires are made using specific polymers that can smother the flames of an ethanol fire but carry a price tag about 30 percent higher than conventional flame-suppressing foams. That means your local fire department has a new line item on the budget.

Enough!

Congress should abolish federal ethanol subsidies, mandates, and the 54-cent-per-gallon tariff on imports — including Brazil’s cheaper, cleaner, sugar-based ethanol. If scientists can develop ethanol that neither starves people nor rapes the Earth, splendid. However, this enterprise must not rest upon morally repugnant, ecologically counterproductive, economically devastating, government-ordered distortions.

It’s time for emergency legislation to repeal ethanol-market meddling. The federal program began as a sop to U.S. grain growers — arguably the most pampered and endlessly entitled people this side of the Saudi royal family. It has grown into a cancer on global food markets. Still, U.S. farmers won’t surrender quietly. Since they are hooked on handouts, let’s offer them one more: In exchange for accepting a two-year federal tax holiday on any income they earn, every actual, tractor-driving corn/biofuel farmer simply would walk away and let Congress relegate state-sponsored ethanol to the Unintended Consequences Hall of Fame. Compared to the global chaos that ethanol is fueling, this is a tolerable, one-time investment to pry these farmers’ and their Washington enablers’ hands off of our necks.

© 2008 Scripps Howard News Service

— Deroy Murdock is a New York-based columnist with the Scripps Howard News Service and a media fellow

with the Hoover Institution.

National Review Online - <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=OTBiOTY2ZTAyMWQwYTJkMDIwMmFiZGY4YzAxM2VkNjc=>