



Douglas A. Durante

Obstacles must be removed to aid the development of biofuels

# Moving beyond the RFS

by **Douglas A. Durante, executive director of the Clean Fuels Development Coalition**

**T**he global biofuels community is without a doubt watching the developments in the US with the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) and might be understandably confused. How is a programme that was passed by the US Congress and supported by Democrats and Republicans alike, and happily signed into law by two different Presidents, so controversial? How can this programme be considered so successful that it was expanded and passed a second time, yet drain such resources from the biofuels industry and draw such ire and venom from the petroleum industry? I have met people from other countries who seem bewildered, asking how renewable biofuels like ethanol that only have a small portion of the massive US motor fuels market, leaving 90% to the oil companies, be such a problem.

After 35 years supporting the development of ethanol, I wish I had a good answer. The obvious one is that the petroleum industry is simply bigger, badder, and can out-yell and outspend our industry in order to keep the market they feel they are entitled to, and one built on tax incentives, government support and millions spent lobbying to keep it that way. We are in a constant battle every year, throughout the year, on issues related to this renewable requirement. It results in dragging ethanol and biofuels through the mud and questioning the decisions and pathway we had already chosen.

What the Clean Fuels Development Coalition (CFDC) is doing is arguing that we need to take a better look at the product all this money and influence has forced on us. When we do, we don't like what we see, and I'll get to that in a moment. But first it's important to note that all the money the refiners and the petroleum industry have spent

has had its intended impact, in that the public is well aware of the real or imagined problems with ethanol – and most are indeed imagined. We are not using food for fuel, we are producing both food and fuel. We do not require more energy to produce ethanol than we produce. We do not increase carbon emissions, we reduce them, as well as emissions from the fuel itself. We do not use more fertiliser than years past, we do not raise food prices, we do not plow under pristine land, we do not raise fuel prices, and the list goes on.

So let's increase awareness of just what comes with gasoline, and hopefully change the perception of the alternatives. Gasoline is useless unless it has a sufficient octane rating, and that is where the problem lies. Refiners synthesise toxic, carcinogenic and energy intensive compounds in oil to raise octane. The result is a high toxic content fuel producing microscopic particulate emissions that are being linked to everything, from respiratory diseases like asthma to neurological problems like autism. And of course, petroleum products are the source of carbon emissions and greenhouse gases.

So how do we stop the endless war that is the RFS and look ahead, not backwards? The growth opportunity for ethanol, and its highest and true value, is to reduce those toxic compounds and to clean up gasoline. Ethanol has the highest octane rating of any allowable fuel or additive and is a low-cost, low-carbon option. But that value can only be realised if we are able to increase volumes beyond the limits of the RFS, which we can't do because we are blocked out of the US market through the negative attacks of the oil industry and the regulatory obstacles of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The EPA recently approved the use

of ethanol from 10% to 15% at the cost of millions of dollars that took 10 years. Despite the fact that blends beyond 15% provide that higher octane that can replace toxic compounds, and higher ethanol is less polluting and more efficient, the EPA has made any blend above that illegal. Furthermore, they have effectively made it impossible to even dispense those fuels. They refuse to update lifecycle and emission models that penalise ethanol, despite what we believe is overwhelming evidence that they are incorrect.

Perhaps most egregious is the fact that in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, Congress required the EPA to reduce these toxic compounds in gasoline to the maximum extent, and as technologies became available. Instead, they have done the minimum in this regard, not the maximum, which would be to recognise that higher ethanol blends are a maximum technology.

Make no mistake, I support the RFS and believe it has and continues to provide extraordinary benefits. We look at it from the standpoint that even if it were not the controversy it is, where do we go from here? Starch or corn ethanol is capped at 15 billion gallons per year, so the RFS is no longer a drive for growth. However, if these obstacles were removed and the US Government tried to further biofuels, rather than hold them back, the requirements of the RFS would be easily surpassed and free market principles would make the RFS levels truly a floor, and not a ceiling. ●

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