
RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

Smog and Mirrors

"What Kind of Fuel Am I?" by Michael Fumento, in *The American Spectator* (Nov. 1990), 2020 N. 14th St., Ste. 750, Arlington, Va. 22216-0549.

For years environmentalists have called for the development of cheap, clean alternatives to gasoline. In November, they were rewarded when Congress passed its landmark Clean Air Act. It requires, among other things, that localities that fail to reach clean air targets by 1992 begin mixing "clean" fuels with gasoline to lower pollution. But while the Clean Air Act might make for a tidy political victory, writes Fumento, a journalist, promoting existing alternative fuels won't do the environment any favors.

The smoke that pours out of your car's tailpipe is a nasty blend of carbon monoxide and other "volatile organic compounds" that become especially harmful when exposed to sunlight. Alternative fuels supposedly burn more completely and thus emit few of the pollutants that create smog. Not quite right, says Fumento. He points to methanol, or wood alcohol, the fuel of choice of Formula One race car drivers and a much-touted "wonder fuel." According to one study, methanol emits more pollutants than gasoline. Ethanol, distilled from corn, sugar cane, or other grains is another "clean-burning" fuel with a large following. Mixed with gasoline, it becomes "gasohol." And while Fumento concedes that its use would cut carbon monoxide emissions, output of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides, which also cause smog, would jump.

Even if alternative fuels were cleaner

than gasoline, Fumento says, they are inefficient and expensive. Ethanol, for instance, costs a hefty \$1.40 per gallon to produce and delivers only 70 percent as much energy per gallon as gasoline.

If alternative fuels are not the wonders that we've been led to believe, then why is Congress so eager to support them? Fumento says it has less to do with clean air than with "good old-fashioned politics and payoffs." As an example, he points to ethanol, the alternative fuel that would be most widely used in potential gasoline-restricted localities. "It is doubtful," he argues, "that ethanol would be considered at all as a fuel today without the legendary lobbying effort of Archer Daniels Midland," the world's largest grain processing company and a leading producer of ethanol. One of its political action committees even has the benign-sounding name, the Renewable Fuels Association.

Fumento isn't sour on all alternative fuels, however. In the near future, he believes, electric vehicles, which currently are limited by batteries that need frequent recharging and replacement, will offer the best alternative to gasoline. General Motors plans to have a model in production by the mid-1990s. In the meantime, though, he says frequent tune-ups and better engine designs—which have already cut auto emissions by 96 percent since 1970—will do more to clean the air than any supposedly "clean" fuel.

The Greening of GNP

"Toward a New 'Eco'-nomics" by Sandra Postel, in *World Watch* (Sept.-Oct. 1990), 1776 Mass. Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, and "The Green Thumb of Capitalism" by William K. Reilly, in *Policy Review* (Fall 1990), 214 Mass. Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

Sometime in the next few years, official tallies of U.S. gross national product (GNP) will be accompanied by an alternative measure that reflects changes in the value

of the nation's natural resources, such as forests, water, even air. This cheers Postel, of the Worldwatch Institute, who notes that current measures of national wealth