Temperance

CARRIE NATION, SAVE US FROM THE SOURCER OF ALCOHOL sweeping across the country! Smash our gas pumps.

Ethanol, so beloved of politicians and farmers, has powerful effects. Growing corn and turning it into a transportation fuel wreaks havoc on our aquifers, our soil and our bank accounts. The problem is destined to get worse, for reasons that Jonathan Fahey outlines on page 35. In a mad rush for subsidies, farm co-ops, Vera-Sun and other outfits erected a few too many ethanol plants. Now there's an impending glut, and the distillers need to get bailed out. The folks in Washington, D.C. will no doubt oblige. Look for George Bush and his Democrat friends (at least, the ones planning to run in the Iowa primary next year) to increase either the tax subsidies for this fuel or the mandates on motorists to use it.

Just what ethanol does for the cause of energy independence is a matter of controversy. Two well-known cynics, David Pimentel of Cornell and Tad Patzek of UC Berkeley, calculate that producing a gallon of corn ethanol consumes 29% more fossil fuel energy than the ethanol displaces. The federal government has a study with the opposite conclusion: The ethanol costs, in fossil fuel terms, 26% less than it's worth. A report from some researchers at Washington State University comes down in the middle, with ethanol making a slight contribution to the country's energy supply.

What about the economics? Drivers put up with alcohol only because it seems to be competitive in price (after the benefit of a federal subsidy) with gasoline. But this volume-for-volume comparison is an illusion. A gallon of ethanol has only two-thirds as much chemical energy as a gallon of gas. You have to burn 1.5 gallons of ethanol to go as far as the gasoline will take you.

That fact alone could choke the ethanol industry down to size—if only drivers knew it. Let's make it known. Rejigger gas pumps so that they charge by the Btu, not by the gallon. What amounts to the same thing: The advertised price on the pump would not be per gallon of fuel but per gallon of pure gasoline equivalent. Any $2 ethanol that the retailer throws into the mix is going to cost him, in effect, $3. It can't compete with $2 gasoline, not without a lot of help from the people buying votes in Iowa.