

Editorial: Should state mandate ethanol use?

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Do you recall the last time the Sierra Club and Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce were on the same side of an issue?

Neither do we.

But they both oppose Assembly Bill 15, which would require nearly all gasoline to be blended with 10 percent ethanol. That should concern Wisconsin residents. Legislators also should show due concern.

Ethanol is thought to be a green fuel alternative that could reduce the United States' need for foreign oil. But the Sierra Club's Wisconsin chapter fears that ethanol does more environmental harm than good. The manufacturers group says that while ethanol reduces carbon monoxide, it adds to ozone and could force factories to reduce emissions.

Milton and Rock County farmers got an economic boost last week when United Cooperative of Beaver Dam announced plans to build a \$60 million ethanol plant in Milton. It should bring about 35 full-time jobs and annually gobble more than 14 million bushels of corn from area growers.

Hopefully, the plans don't hinge on a statewide ethanol mandate.

About 40 percent of the gas sold in the state already contains about 10 percent ethanol. But makers of some older and smaller engines don't advise its use. Ethanol is essentially alcohol, which absorbs water. If the fuel sits a long time, such as in a snowmobile or boat motor, the alcohol and petroleum can separate and lead to complications. Minnesota mandates ethanol use but allows non-ethanol fuel for smaller engines and classic cars. Wisconsin would also exempt some engines. But few Minnesota stations offer non-ethanol gas because of the cost of underground tanks.

Alcohol evaporates, and that adds to summer smog. Milwaukee and five surrounding counties in southeastern Wisconsin use expensive reformulated gas to cut smog. Critics argue that requiring ethanol in all gas would imperil air in Rock and other counties that ring those counties. Besides being detrimental to factories, ethanol might force those collar counties to burn reformulated gas.

Furthermore, studies show that fuel efficiency decreases about 3 percent with ethanol. That could cut Wisconsin fuel efficiency by more than 1.5 billion miles a year.

The bill might hit the Assembly floor this week. The federal government subsidizes ethanol at 51 cents per gallon. The state subsidizes start-up producers at 20 cents a gallon in a law that expires in June 2006.

Both sides of the issue cite environmental studies supporting their claims. This conflicting research should be reason for caution. Another mandate could prove costly in the long run. It might be better to let the subsidies and market forces dictate just how much ethanol is produced and consumed.