

Fact Checking the AP's Hatchet Job on Ethanol

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The Associated Press recently released a biased, one-sided story on renewable fuel's impact on the environment.

A full fact check of that story follows, but first some things the story got correct (direct excerpts):

- “Ethanol still looks good compared to the oil industry, which increasingly relies on environmentally risky tactics like hydraulic fracturing or pulls from carbon-heavy tar sands.”
- “It's impossible to precisely calculate how much ethanol is responsible for the spike in corn prices and how much those prices led to the land changes in the Midwest.”
- “The environmental consequences of drilling for oil and natural gas are well documented and severe.”

A full review of the facts that were egregiously omitted or skewed in the AP story related to corn ethanol.

- **Claim:** Ethanol production has caused 5 million acres of land to be removed from the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) since Obama took office.

Fact: The 2008 Farm Bill [removed funding for roughly 7 million acres of CRP land](#). Based on this law, the number of enrolled acres has decreased to fit within the programs new, smaller budget. It is legally impossible to get back to pre-2008 levels of CRP enrollment. This has nothing to do with ethanol. Since the cap was lowered, acres have been near (92%-98%) the new cap each year.

- **Claim:** Landowners have been filling in wetlands because of ethanol production and have been plowing pristine prairies.

Fact: Current law strictly prohibits the conversion of sensitive ecosystems to cropland. The provisions of the Energy Independence and Security Act (EISA) require that corn and other feedstocks used to produce renewable fuels for RFS [may only be sourced from land that was actively engaged in agricultural production in 2007](#), the year of the bill's enactment. Feedstocks grown on land converted to cropland after 2007 would not qualify as “renewable biomass,” and therefore biofuels produced from these feedstocks would not generate RIN credits for the RFS.

Acreage enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program hit a record high of 2.65 million acres in 2012. The land that is enrolled in the program stays for a [minimum of 30 years](#), meaning landowners are not allowed to fill in wetlands as they please. USDA predicts that enrollment in this program will [continue to rise](#).

Moreover, according to EPA's latest Greenhouse Gas Inventory, no new grassland has been converted to cropland since 2005 and grassland sequestered 14% more carbon in 2011 (latest data available) than 1990.

- **Claim:** Corn prices have spent most of the year at about \$7 per bushel.

Fact: Corn prices have been below \$7 per bushel for most of 2013. The day the AP article was first published, corn futures were trading at the [lowest price](#) since 2010: \$4.26 per bushel.

- **Claim:** Farmers planted 15 million more acres of corn the year before the ethanol boom.

Fact: Farmers increased corn acreage in 2012 and 2013 in response to drought ravaged corn supplies, not because of ethanol. In fact, [less corn](#) was and will be used for ethanol in 2012 and 2013 than in 2011. Moreover, the increase in corn acres has been achieved through [crop switching](#), not through the cultivation of new lands, as the story alleges.

- **Claim:** Corn demands fertilizer, which is made using natural gas and ethanol facilities burn coal or gas both of which release carbon dioxide and that makes ethanol a climate disaster.

Fact: According to Argonne National Laboratory in a [peer-reviewed study](#), when you tally emissions related to fertilizer and chemical production, diesel use on the farm, transportation of the corn, energy used by the ethanol plant, transportation of ethanol to the market, and land use change emission, corn ethanol on average reduces GHG emissions by 34% compared to gasoline. Argonne National Laboratory is not the only institution that has concluded ethanol provides emissions benefits relative to gasoline: [Purdue University](#), the [University of Nebraska](#), [Michigan State University](#), [Oak Ridge National Laboratory/Duke University](#), and the [University of Illinois-Chicago](#) have all published work in the past few years documenting the GHG and environmental benefits of ethanol.

Additionally, 90% of ethanol plants use natural gas a power source and only 10% use coal.

- **Claim:** Historically, the majority of corn in the US has been turned into livestock feed. In and since 2010, fuel has been the top use of corn in America.

Fact: The story ignores that for each bushel of corn that goes into an ethanol facility, [17 pounds of animal feed is produced and returned into the market](#). When this major source of livestock feed is not omitted from the calculation, livestock feed remains by far the number one use of corn. In 2012, ethanol [consumed](#) 26% of the corn crop, while livestock feed accounted for 50%.

- **Claim:** Forty-four percent of last year's corn crop was used for fuel.

Fact: According to the USDA, 4.67 billion bushels were used for ethanol *and* feed co-product production out of a total of 11.93 billion bushels produced. This represents 39%, not 44%. But since much of that 39% was used to make animal feed, only 26% of the crop [turned into fuel](#).

- **Claim:** Corn farmers have increased their use of nitrogen fertilizer from 2005-2010.

Fact: If you look take a starting point of 2007, when the RFS was enacted, [nitrogen use fell](#) by 2010.

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