

Biofuel not the magic bullet



BRIAN
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“Across the board, alternative fuels depend on infrastructure, from refineries to service stations, and I’d love to see someone try to build a new turbine using only wind power. It’s unlikely that the current generation of alternative fuels we have would be able to power their own deployment, let alone the world.”

With all the hype that’s been building over over biofuels in the last few years, I’ve been waiting and hoping for someone to finally put an end to the nonsense. Two studies published last month went the furthest yet by concluding that widespread biofuel production would lead to an overall increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

However, this shouldn’t come as a surprise. Land for growing the biomass requires deforestation on a huge scale—assuming, of course, we even have enough land. And it only gets worse: the UN is warning that African food prices are now tied to fuel prices, and in what will be yet another struggle between the rich and poor, the result is a foregone conclusion.

When someone like George W Bush jumps on board, you know biofuels aren’t about anything but oil independence. Only the most rosy-glassed ecologists would believe that the Bush administration actually cares about the environment—more likely, they’re just trying to appease “Big Corn” with subsidies and maybe avoiding a war or two over Middle-Eastern oil.

It’s just another in the long list of alternative fuel sources that are supposed to save us all, but are really just PR campaigns and hand-waving by energy companies, governments, and media outlets who are too scared to tell the public what they don’t want to hear: we’re going to need to reduce consumption. With enough investment in research, there’s still the potential for a solution, but the reality is that we’re still a long way off.

This doesn’t just go for biofuels, either. Alternative energies almost uniformly have problems, whether the peaking issues of solar and wind or

locational constraints of geothermal. Each of these, among others, is viable on a small scale in a cheap fuel era, but probably won’t be the quick global fix that we’re all looking for.

Hydrogen is great in theory, as the emissions are pure water. Unfortunately, that view fails to take the full picture into account. Using electricity to split water so that we can generate electricity by reforming it is a perpetual motion fantasy, meaning hydrogen fuel cells are at best batteries. At worst, they’re expensive, inefficient, exploding batteries. Certainly, if we can find another way to produce hydrogen, there’s hope, but until that time hydrogen isn’t terribly useful.

For better or worse, nuclear energy is one of the few certainties. We have the fuel, we have the technology, and if we’re desperate it will be there. Waste will be a problem, as will weaponization, but the reality is that nuclear is one of the few sources of energy that is just sitting there waiting, and if nothing else pans out, don’t be surprised if we end up relying more on fission. Unfortunately, uranium too is a limited resource, and there are no guarantees.

The main problem with alternative energies is the complete lack of objectivity. Subsidies are warping the picture from environmental concern to plain old greed—if someone paid me a million dollars I’d start pumping out corn ethanol too. The trouble is, I’d probably do it the same way as everyone else: with petroleum products. I’m not just talking diesel trucks and tractors, but fertilizers, irrigation, processing, and distribution. Current farm production levels are hostage to cheap energy, and adding competition for land and resources certainly won’t help.

It’s virtually impossible to isolate each of these fuels and properly evaluate them. About the only way would be to put them in their own bubble and completely cut off the outside world. Across the board, alternative fuels depend on infrastructure, from refineries to service stations, and I’d love to see someone try to build a new turbine using only wind power. It’s unlikely that the current generation of alternative fuels we have would be able to power their own deployment, let alone the world. If they’re unleashed across the globe, there’s no telling what the long-term side effects would be.

The automotive industry and consumers are very focused on a set of well-defined variables—power, speed, size, and the like—but there are no objective measures for impact. Mileage breaks down as soon as you start talking about different fuels, and it doesn’t capture things like the impacts of manufacturing or disposing of batteries for hybrids. There’s no easy way to compare different types of pollution, and car dealership statistics certainly don’t include things like “years of life lost,” “countries exploited,” or “children’s futures sold.”

The green movement suffers from marketing spin, which makes it impossible to compare products. Neglect the disadvantages, pump up the advantages, and let the magic happen. Narrow the focus enough and I’m sure someone could come up with some good things to say about fossil fuels—such as how they’re just waiting to be exploited. Mark Twain’s claim of “lies, damned lies, and statistics” is appropriate, and we could find ourselves back in the world of Tom Sawyer if we retool our economy around a dud.

Why can’t ETS, STAT just get along?



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unlikely given that the only St Albertian students I know with a car are a couple prone to public displays of affection. And because I know you’re reading this, Yolanda, I don’t care about the flavour of his tonsils or how it sounds like a bear when you two hum into each other’s mouths, because there are some things I just don’t need to know.

Because of this, I’ve come to rely on buses—which, for the most part, tend to work. St Albert Transit (STAT) and Edmonton Transit System (ETS) are both very good systems—independently, that is. The problem is that they don’t communicate well with each other, and that’s a serious problem given how much their mandates overlap. The brand-spanking new ETS electronic route planners, for instance, describe ETS in great detail, but don’t even acknowledge the existence of any other systems from St Albert to Strathcona and in between. During the tutorial, my repeated requests about STAT schedules were met with polite condolences and nothing more.

Likewise, STAT’s survey had not one word about ETS bus routes, schedules, or transfers, despite the high number of multi-system commuters. It’s basically impossible to use STAT to get anywhere specific in Edmonton on a weekend, for example, and especially

after 5pm. ETS transfers are necessary, but they don’t come up anywhere on the mandate. There are several other transit systems in the area, but the STAT/ETS dischord represents a problem common to all of them.

Visiting their websites is equally uninspiring. STAT and ETS make brief mentions or links to each other, but they don’t have what’s really necessary: an overview or direct link to each other’s schedules, or some form of electronic route planner that takes all systems into consideration. We’ve all got a U-Pass now, which can be used on both—so shouldn’t there be an easier system that enables us to use both to get around?

Unfortunately, since the two each refuse to admit that they’re not the primary transit service for every rider, miscommunications are inevitable, which is how one winds up stranded on campus at two in the morning with no feasible alternatives. Not that I’m bitter.

I still like riding the bus and I’ll probably continue to do so, but if STAT and ETS could just learn to play nice with each other, I, along with a good deal of other people, would be a lot happier. Otherwise I’m going to have to start relying on Mr and Mrs Tonsil Hockey, and no one wants that—especially me.

Some people believe that a child wearing a bear costume is adorable.

THESE PEOPLE ARE TRAITORS TO OUR CAUSE.

If you want to discuss the growing problem of bear sympathizers, drop by one of our Four O’clock Thursday meetings in SUB 3-04.



GATEWAY OPINION

Watching out for bear spies since 1910

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is the payment you
make for your space
here on earth.**

- Mohammed Ali

*Inspire others with the story
of where and why you
volunteer!*

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