

## Issue of the Week: For Florida, biofuel is a gas, gas, gas

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By Rep. TIM MAHONEY

During the 1970s, Americans were told that to protect national security and ensure continued economic growth, we needed to end our dependence on foreign oil. Since then, Democratic and Republican administrations have ignored the problem, and we are paying the price at the pump.

In December, the Democratic Congress, working with President Bush, passed legislation that finally puts America on the road toward reducing that dependence. The Energy Independence and Security Act sets new fuel economy standards for cars and trucks and requires gasoline companies to purchase cellulosic ethanol - which uses plant and agricultural waste, instead of food - that will be mixed with gasoline.

Furthermore, under this innovative legislation, more homeowners can receive tax credits for retrofitting their homes to use solar energy. Businesses can get tax credits for utilizing wind energy, plant materials and landfill waste.

Meanwhile, the farm bill that passed Congress last week despite the president's promised veto will help us reduce our dependence on foreign oil and lay the foundation for Florida to become the biofuels capital of the United States.

The bill changes the definition of ethanol from "corn" to "cellulosic ethanol," giving Florida an opportunity to break the stranglehold the Midwest has had on ethanol made from corn. While corn-producing states have seen an economic boom because of skyrocketing demand for corn and ethanol, the rest of the nation has seen food prices rise because corn is both a major food supplement and a feed staple for livestock.

Now, corn will begin to be supplanted with cellulosic ethanol, a "greener" fuel that uses less energy to produce more fuel and emits fewer greenhouse gas emissions than corn ethanol or petroleum. This new "green" industry will thrive in the subtropical lower third of our state, where we not only produce the most biomass - non-food material that can be converted into fuel - but the greatest variety of biomass in the nation.

Congress is serious about helping the cellulosic ethanol industry. The farm bill puts \$2 billion into research and development grants to perfect the production process. The government will guarantee 80 percent of loans from local banks to biofuel entrepreneurs for building plants. Because of the energy bill, gas companies must begin purchasing 100 million gallons of cellulosic ethanol in 2010, until they reach 23 billion gallons in 2026. Additionally, the ethanol subsidy to gas companies will give Florida producers a 51-cent-per-gallon advantage if they purchase cellulosic ethanol instead of corn ethanol.

This all translates into millions of dollars being invested in South Florida, where studies estimate that the cellulosic ethanol could generate thousands of new jobs. We are seeing results already. In the past year alone, there have been five major cellulosic ethanol projects announced in our area. These projects will convert sugar waste, citrus pulp and peel, sorghum, sugar fiber and plant waste into fuel while creating jobs.

To prepare for this economic shift, I am working with local colleges and universities to get financing to prepare students for jobs in the ethanol industry. I also am working to improve our roads, rail lines and airports, to make sure that we have the infrastructure to support this new industry. We are moving forward, for the first time in a decade, to get federal money to fix the Everglades. When complete, the restoration will provide the water we need to sustain and grow our economy.

Biofuels will transform South Florida. It is an industry that protects the environment while giving our children the opportunity to have high-paying jobs with a future. It will keep our agricultural lands out of the hands of developers, since growers and ranchers can make more money by working the land. We will see our communities on the coast become corporate headquarters and research and development centers. In the rural areas, we will create jobs, expand the tax base and give our children the opportunity to live their American dreams without having to leave their hometowns.

Most important, we will make America more secure, so that we never again will be held hostage to foreign oil.