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Introduction to *Ethanol: Salvation or Damnation?*

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In recent years, a constellation of buzzwords has rumbled throughout the land, echoing up and down the halls of Congress, across big-city boulevards and out onto the open plains, penetrating deep within Nebraska's farm country. By now, everyone — politicians, scientists, researchers and all manner of everyday citizens – has become well-acquainted with the buzzwords: fossil fuels, carbon footprints, global warming, biofuels, alternative energy, energy independence.

And with a vital presidential race heating up, oil topping out at more than $140 a barrel and a gallon of gas now hovering near $4, questioning exactly what those phrases mean has become more critical than ever.

Can a nation that constitutes 3 percent of the global population but consumes 25 percent of its oil dramatically reduce its reliance on fossil fuels? Can we come up with an alternative fuel that keeps more money in our collective wallets, cleans up the environment and helps free us from the clutches of Mideast despots?

In his 2007 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush declared that ethanol offered Americans the best hope for a stable energy supply. Among other things, Bush said, the corn-based gasoline additive would help liberate the U.S. from hostile foreign regimes and put money in the pockets of American farmers. To help achieve his goal, the president decreed that 16 billion gallons of corn-based ethanol be available to American consumers by 2017.

But in short order, the presidential directive spawned as many questions as answers: Would a network of ethanol plants in Corn Country really revitalize rural communities? Does corn-based ethanol require more energy to create than it yields? Are there health risks and environmental issues to contend with? Has using corn for fuel helped drive up the cost of food, sparking riots in some parts of the world? In the end, do alternative biofuel sources — switchgrass, sweet sorghum, algae — offer better results than corn?

For nine months, a team of UNL student journalists — six print and four broadcasting — went looking for the answers to these questions. The students read hundreds of pages of background material, interviewed scores of scientists, researchers, professors and energy experts by phone and e-mail, grilled a number of ethanol advocates in person, participated in an energy symposium at Stanford University, traveled to Berkeley, Chicago and Kansas City, and visited ethanol plants, rural communities and cattle country to try to get to the bottom of this elusive, complex issue.

The results of their months-long research can be found in the following stories, graphics and photographs.

— JOE STARITA

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