

Letting a Good Crisis Go to Waste

Current climate policy proposals largely ignore ethanol, despite the well-documented fact that ethanol has been the primary tool for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the United States by tens of millions of tons over the past three decades.

By Ron Lamberty | February 17, 2022

Younger people may associate the phrase “Never let a good crisis go to waste” with Rahm Emanuel following the 2008 Wall Street meltdown, but most credit Winston Churchill with the quote, offered to explain how he got Russia to agree with England and the U.S. to form the United Nations during the Yalta Conference at the end of World War II. While the idea of capitalizing on a crisis seems distasteful, both of those men explained they used the extra attention provided by a crisis to accomplish something good that they hadn’t been able to get done in “normal times.”

In the interest of accuracy, though, Niccolò Machiavelli first wrote “never waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis” more than 400 years before either of those guys, and he wasn’t exactly a warm, fuzzy, benevolent dude, so it’s probably natural (and smart) to distrust anyone leveraging a crisis to their own advantage.

Current actions of policymakers, environmentalists and the EPA make me wonder about their definition of “crisis” when they talk about the climate crisis, and whether they realize they’re probably wasting it. I mean, when you think of a crisis like, let’s say, a house on fire with no fire truck in sight, wouldn’t you grab hoses and buckets and anything else that would hold water to put it out, or at least keep it from spreading? More to this point, would you refuse to call a fire truck because it uses so much water, or if you called 911 and a firetruck showed up, would you turn it away and wait for an electric firetruck?

The EPA’s recent “Proposed Volume Standards for 2020, 2021, and 2022” is more like calling for a fuel truck to come and put the fire out by spraying it with gasoline. The EPA reduced ethanol volumes, which requires increasing gasoline volumes. While we’re waiting for electric vehicles (EVs) to gain a foothold, the EPA apparently isn’t interested in making the fuel supply cleaner, or even trying to keep fuel as clean as it already is today.

Current climate crisis policy proposals largely ignore ethanol, despite the well-documented

fact that ethanol has been the primary tool reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by tens of millions of tons in the first decade of the California Low Carbon Fuel Standard (LCFS) and hundreds of millions of tons in the 35 years since the Clean Air Act was passed. Historically, opposition has been based on well-documented and disproven misinformation (and still is), but a growing amount of current resistance is less ignorant and more unscrupulous. They know ethanol works but think inclusion of ethanol in climate policy would delay or destroy electric adoption.

But the 97 percent of drivers who didn't buy all-electric cars last year also didn't buy flex-fuel vehicles. With TV commercials, huge rebates and proponents gushing about new options, 2021 was the best-ever year for plug-in electrics, a hard number of 435,000 all-electrics or 2.8 percent of the 15,500,000 passenger vehicles sold last year. Consumers also bought a record 800,000 hybrids last year, bringing total all-time U.S. EV sales to 8.75 million, with 7.25 million of them liquid fuel-using hybrids.

More ethanol does not mean fewer EVs, but it does mean lower emissions now to address the climate crisis today. We can't stop people from letting their own houses burn down, but we also can't let them insist other homes burn down waiting for electric fire trucks full of Perrier. Ethanol didn't start the fire, but we can help put it out. We just might have to turn the firehose on the naysayers, put out the fire, and tell them to thank us later.

Author: Ron Lamberty
Senior Vice President
American Coalition for Ethanol
605.334.3381
rlamberty@ethanol.org