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NAS Reports Water Concerns for Corn-based Ethanol

Farm and Energy Bills Should Support Water-Friendly Energy Crops

MINNEAPOLIS — A National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report released today found that the corn-based ethanol system is exacerbating water quality and quantity issues in the Upper Midwest and the Mississippi River. The report's findings support the urgent need for U.S. farm and energy policy to help shift the biofuel industry toward environmentally friendly perennial grasses, which use less water and fewer chemical inputs, as the primary feedstocks for biofuel production, according to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

The NAS report found that although biofuels are currently a marginal additional stress on water supplies regionally, a significant acceleration of biofuel production without proper environmental safeguards could cause much greater water quantity problems. The NAS report confirmed findings in IATP's 2006 report, "Water Use by Ethanol Plants: Potential Challenges." IATP Senior Fellow and the report's co-author Dr. Dennis Keeney testified at a July NAS colloquium on biofuels and water in Washington, D.C.

In 2007, U.S. corn acreage increased a whopping 18.5 percent from 2006, resulting in 14 million more acres of corn. Congress is currently considering increasing the renewable fuel standard in a new Energy Bill, which could further increase corn acreage. "A biofuel system based exclusively on corn creates a host of environmental problems, including expanding the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico," says Dr. Keeney. "We are at a critical point for the biofuel economy and policy has an important role to play for making the shift toward more environmentally friendly energy crops. We can help the industry and farmers make this transition through policies set in the Farm Bill and Energy Bill."

"Our national farm policies have focused on growing a lot of corn and then creating new uses for that corn, such as ethanol," said Mark Muller, co-author of IATP's water and ethanol report and director of the Environment and Agriculture program. "We know that environmentally friendly perennial feedstocks are the best option for the biofuel industry in the long-term. We are at a point now where policies should encourage feedstocks for biofuels that better support water quality, farmers and rural communities."

Perennial grasses, such as switchgrass, need less fertilizer and chemicals, and reduce soil erosion that can lead to water pollution. The NAS report states that a policy bridge will likely be needed to encourage the development of cellulosic technologies. Fortunately, states like Minnesota are already leading the way toward a transition from corn-based ethanol. This year, the Minnesota legislature passed the Reinvest in Minnesota-Clean Energy program, which provides incentives for farmers to plant perennial crops for energy in return for crop production practices based on environmental criteria. This approach is mirrored in the Bioenergy Crop Reserve Program included in the House-passed U.S. Farm Bill, which includes incentives for farmers to produce cellulosic energy crops.

IATP's water and ethanol report can be found at www.iatp.org. The NAS report can be found at: www.nationalacademies.org/

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works globally to promote resilient family farms, communities and ecosystems through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.