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Greater Water Efficiency Crucial for Ethanol's Future, New Paper

State and Local Government, Industry Need to Make Water Conservation a Priority

Minneapolis - The shortage of available water could become the Achilles heel of the ethanol boom if more efficient use of water isn't made a priority, finds a new paper by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

Water Use by Ethanol Plants is by IATP Senior Fellow Dr. Dennis Keeney and Mark Muller, director of IATP's Environment and Agriculture program. The paper found that few states are monitoring water use at ethanol plants and public information is limited. The paper can be found at: www.iatp.org.

There are currently no publicly available records on water use by ethanol plants in the U.S. In a review of major ethanol states, only the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has public records on water use by specific plants. In Minnesota, ethanol plants have improved the efficiency of their water use from an average of 5.8 gallons of water per gallon of ethanol produced in 1998 to 4.2:1 in 2005. Assuming Minnesota's data is typical of other ethanol plants around the country, the paper speculated that water use associated with ethanol plants could increase by 254 percent from 1998 to 2008.

"Despite steady improvements in the efficiency of water use in ethanol plants, the sheer number of new ethanol plants being built has the potential to put a strain on the Corn Belt's water resources," said Dr. Keeney. "The good news is that much of ethanol's water demands can be met with appropriate planning. But that planning is currently not happening at the level it needs to."

Most ethanol plants in the U.S. are based in the Midwest because of their proximity to corn, their primary feedstock. Parts of the Midwest are experiencing significant water supply concerns, particularly in the western portion of the region. Rural industries, mainly livestock production, consume considerable water. Crop irrigation, while not widespread east of the Missouri River, is necessary in Great Plains states.

"Economic development is only sustainable if it strengthens, rather than depletes, natural resources," said Muller. "We've already seen a few communities reject ethanol plants because of concerns about water usage. Rural communities have been very supportive of ethanol production because it uses local corn and often has the support of local investors. If ethanol's water consumption leads to disputes in local communities, that good will toward ethanol may disappear."

The paper's recommendations include: 1) strengthening regulatory oversight by state and local government on the siting of ethanol plants, with special emphasis on the water supply; 2) where feasible, site plants adjacent to municipal wastewater facilities; 3) look for water recycling opportunities with livestock facilities; 4) place a greater economic value on water; 5) maintain publicly available records on ethanol's water consumption.

IATP has posted the paper on its web site at: www.iatp.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.