



Ethanol's Astral Hell

By Marcos Jank

Few sectors spark as much media interest, both nationally and internationally, as the Brazilian sugarcane industry. In 2008, we received 162 delegations from more than 60 countries that were interested in our experience with ethanol and bioelectricity. We field more than 30 requests per day from journalists. We have a staff of ten professionals dedicated to providing information and clarifying doubts. And yet, there are still examples of overstatements, lack of context, biased reporting and general disinformation, intended or otherwise, about the cane industry.

This is part of the emotional baggage the industry carries, which comes from the difficulty many have when it comes to separating the old from the new. The historical image of the original processing mills, prior to the paradigm shift that has taken place in the renewable energy sector blurs the image of the new environment where the sugarcane sector finds its greatest application. The sugarcane industry is the country's second leading energy source (17% of the matrix), behind first-place oil (37% of the matrix) but ahead of hydroelectricity (13%).

Maybe the industry should become even more proactive and further improve its communication structure, not only in Brazil but internationally as well. However, the reality is that changes in the sector are profound and go well beyond communication.

In the environmental arena we have signed an agreement with the government of São Paulo in which we voluntarily speed up the end of the practice of cane burning, to the middle of the next decade. Recently, we created the Brazilian Climate Alliance with 15 other organizations, to propose proactive policies in Brazil and in global climate change negotiations. We also created an educational program about climate change that will impact more than 2 million students.

Regarding labor conditions, we have signed the first national commitment to recognizing best labor practices, together with labour unions and the federal government. And we launched the biggest requalification program in the world for cane workers, to lessen the impact of advancing mechanization.

There remains, however, a lack of understanding or validation of information. This may be a sign of a lack of familiarity or contact with the industry by those who disseminate information. The absence of a better relationship between policy-making organizations and sensationalist tendencies within the media also contribute to the incomplete and often simplistic way in which complex aspects of the cane industry are portrayed. In the past two weeks, we experienced a sequence of events that caused a great deal of concern, in which the main victim has been the quality of the information distributed. Chronologically:

On September 10th, the Environment Ministry announced an Action Plan to Control Deforestation in regions with Cerrado vegetation. The plan actually states that sugarcane is "a deforestation vector" and as such, one of the reasons for the destruction of the Cerrado. But satellite data from the Brazilian National Institute of Space Research (Inpe) has clearly shown that 98% of sugarcane's expansion in the Cerrado occurs without any deforestation.



On September 17th, the government announced its Agroecological Zoning rules for sugarcane, which will eliminate any possibility of expansion that might lead to deforestation. We have always supported this drastic measure, because we believe that linking ethanol production to deforestation is a highly inaccurate misrepresentation of fact. The government project, however, does bring restrictions to the growing of cane even in established agricultural areas, which seems to be an unnecessary hindrance to progress.

On September 20th, the Brazilian weekly magazine *Veja*, in its cover story, pointed to sugar as the main culprit of what it describes as a global obesity epidemic. Is the real problem in the product itself or in the exaggerated consumption of carbohydrates and the emergence of a sedentary lifestyle in modern society? Diet products have never been sold in such high quantities and at the same time obesity is at an all time high. Whose fault is that?

The worst moment of this misinformation sequence came with the publication, by the Brazilian Environment Ministry, of a document that attempted to classify motor vehicles according to their emissions. The entire global community is currently interested in the development of a 'low carbon fuel' that is able to reduce GHG emissions. Brazil has used such a fuel for 34 years, both through the blending of ethanol in gasoline (E25) and with its flex-fuel car fleet, in rapid expansion thanks to sales figures showing that 90% of all new light vehicles sold in the country are flex. Brazil has achieved an ample supply of pure and low-priced ethanol throughout the country.

But when the Environment Ministry's new ranking of 'green cars' was finally published, the organizers surprisingly ignored carbon emissions. There are a series of examples of international analyses that combine three crucial factors to rate a vehicle: exhaust emissions, GHG emissions and fuel consumption. The combination of these three factors will certainly indicate the superiority of renewable fuels over fossil fuels. If this ranking is not revised, we will compromise not just the export of the flex technology developed in Brazil, but also our own history and credibility behind our biofuels program.

Those with a more pessimistic approach believe the facts above are evidence of an organized campaign against the success of ethanol. I would rather believe only in a series of rushed announcements of environmental data, coupled with a lack of understanding of what the sector is today. One of the worst moments we have had to endure so far occurred on Sunday, September 20, when the daily *O Estado de S.Paulo*, one of the leading newspapers in Latin America, stated in a front page story that the ethanol industry is seeking "protection" from the government against upcoming competition from new oil discoveries. This may yet turn out to be true, even if we do hope that Brazil will not make the stupid mistake of throwing away its unique experience with renewable energy, something that is admired throughout the world. But I sincerely believe that the facts show that we need to worry about things that will happen in coming months and not in the next decade. Intensifying our efforts to build a sustainable agroenergy network, support public policies that make sense and correct the vast disinformation that still exists seem much more important than worrying about competition from the new oil discoveries.



Article published originally in the daily O Estado de S. Paulo, in the September 23, 2009 edition.

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