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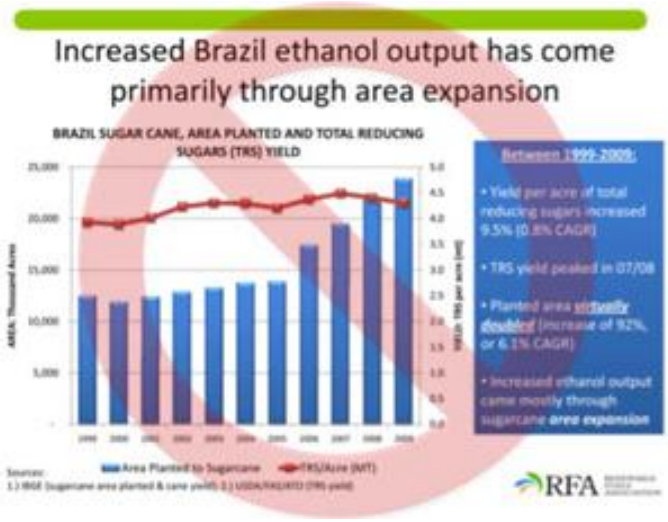
RFA: Cherry-Picking Crop Data on Capitol Hill
By Joel Velasco

Nobel Prize winning economist Ronald Coase is said to have coined the adage "If you torture the data long enough, it will confess." Well, my friend Bob Dinneen of the Renewable Fuels Association (RFA) has once again proven that when it comes to cherry picking data, he's one of Washington's best.

Last week, while making a presentation before the House Agriculture Committee's Bioenergy Forum, RFA's top lobbyist falsely stated "increased Brazil ethanol output has come primarily through area expansion" (see the image from his presentation to the right).

While I'm not going to dispute the yield improvements in genetically-modified corn (I hope they are right and a sign of the great things to come in agriculture), I do take issue with what seems like an intentionally dishonest portrayal of sugarcane ethanol's performance to score political points in Washington.



Here's what RFA's Dinneen should have said: Sugarcane, like corn, is experiencing considerable yield gains, producing more food, fiber and fuel on the same acre of land. In fact, sugarcane yields, measured in Total Recoverable Sugars (TRS) by acre have been growing at an annual rate of about 3% since 1975, as the chart below indicates. By way of comparison, since 1975, corn yields, measured in bushels per acre, have been growing at an annual rate of about 2%, and even faster in last few years.

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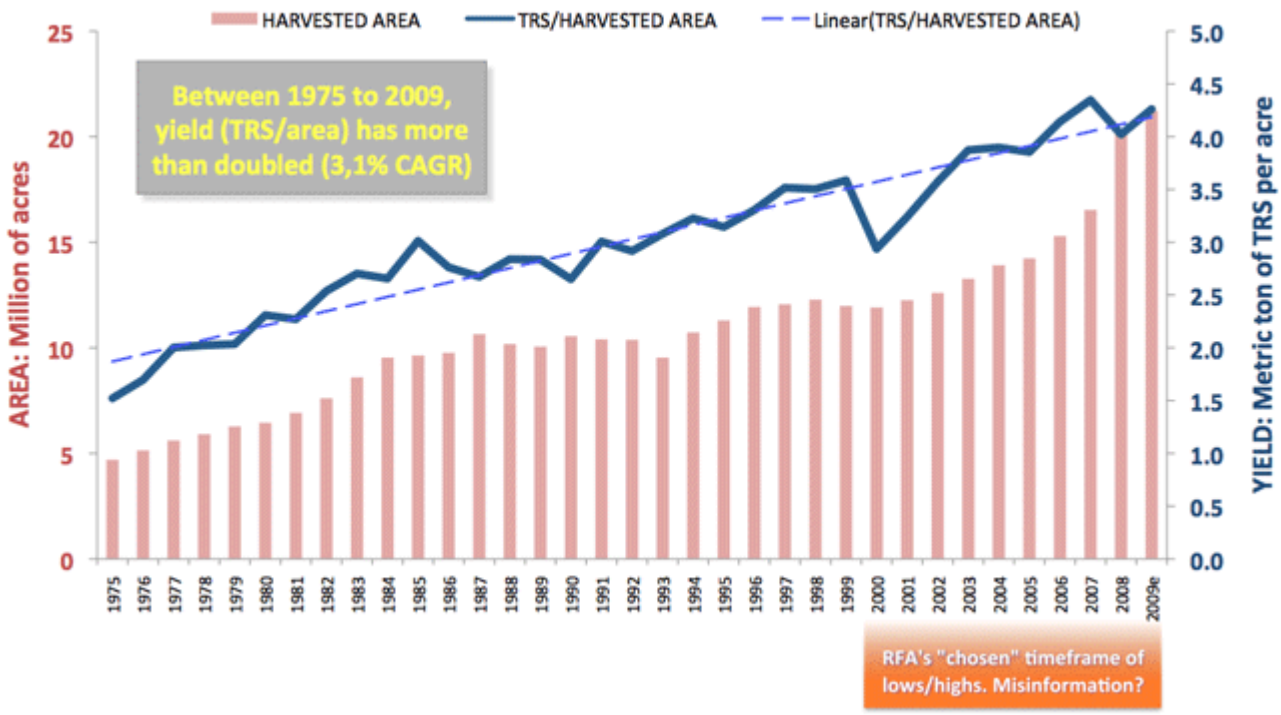

That's the good news about biofuels. Why can't consumers benefit from having more choices?

And for the technical folks out there here are two pointers when looking at sugarcane in Brazil:

1. In sugarcane, it's the sucrose that matters, not the tons.

Physical yield of the sugarcane plant is not the only source of yield gains in the production of sugarcane ethanol. The yield gain in Total Recoverable Sugars (TRS) should also be taken into account. While RFA recognized this, they seem to suggest that sucrose yields don't matter, just the area planted with sugarcane. More sucrose per acre is just as important as kernels per corn cob. For a more detailed discussion on this, see page 19 of my letter to the California Air Resources Board during the Low Carbon Fuel Standard regulatory process.

2. Careful with short-term, apples vs. oranges comparisons

The crop cycles for sugarcane are not the same for corn. Unlike corn's short crop cycle, sugarcane is a semi-perennial crop that takes about a year to reach maturity and is then harvested for 5-7 years without needing to be replanted. So, anyone trying to compare the two should take a long-term view and be careful not to predict the future based on what happened in the last 2-3 years.

3. The amount of acreage planted with sugarcane is not indicative of sugarcane harvest.

During the recent years where RFA shows a run up in area planted with sugarcane in Brazil, a significant quantity of sugarcane was not harvested for various reasons, ranging from weather to economic conditions. For instance, in 2007 alone, there were about 3 million acres (1.2 million hectares) of sugarcane planted in Brazil that were not harvested. But that's a fact of life, yet another way that cane is different that corn. So, dividing non-harvested cane by Total Recoverable Sugars, as RFA did in the presentation, leads to the perception that yields are lower than reality. That might have been RFA's objective but it's not accurate. Incidentally, from a climate mitigation standpoint, leaving cane on ground is good news as cane is one of the most photosynthetic efficient plants on earth, capturing a lot of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.

4. Not all sugarcane goes to making fuel ethanol or sugar.

Ever heard of caipirinhas? What about cane as cattle feed? Well, RFA chose to use data from IBGE (a Brazilian statistical agency) that estimates the acreage of sugarcane planted without distinguishing its purpose or use. Quite a bit of Brazilian sugarcane is used for making booze and cattle feed. That cane never goes to make sugar or fuel ethanol, so including it in the RFA analysis was yet another way to manipulate the data and disparage sugarcane for political gain. In the future, RFA ought to use accurate data. UNICA has relied on advanced satellite imagery analysis for several years to make crop estimates and polling producers to ascertain actual production.

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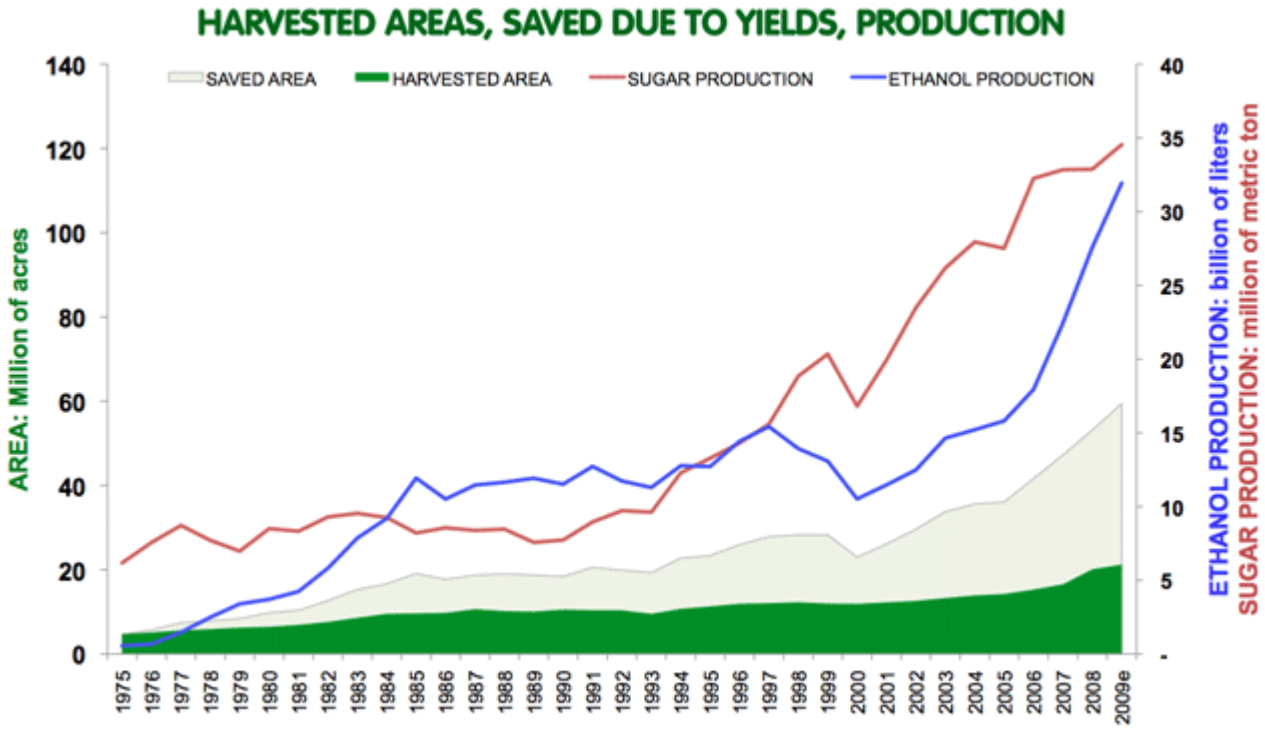

Luckily for Americans, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Air Resources Board have carefully analyzed sugarcane ethanol and have confirmed that cane ethanol is an advanced, low carbon biofuel that reduces emissions with minimal land use impacts.

With $6 billion in subsidies at stake, RFA's desperate measures come as no surprise. We know better than to trust any analysis of yields over a short time period. Agriculture is about the long view. Study after study – from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and independent researchers alike– have confirmed that sugarcane ethanol has over 60% reduction in greenhouse gases, including indirect land use effects.

The time has come for the RFA to shoot straight and stop sending Congress and the American people through a maize of spin when it comes to ethanol.

PS: Did you notice the choice of different scales on RFA's chart for sugarcane vs. corn. One wonders what they were trying to do.

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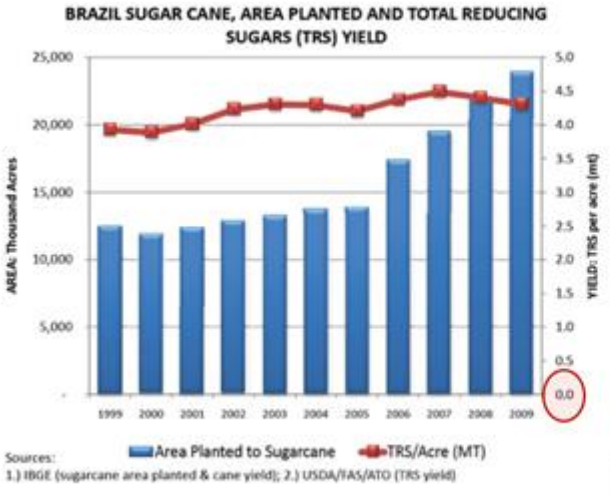

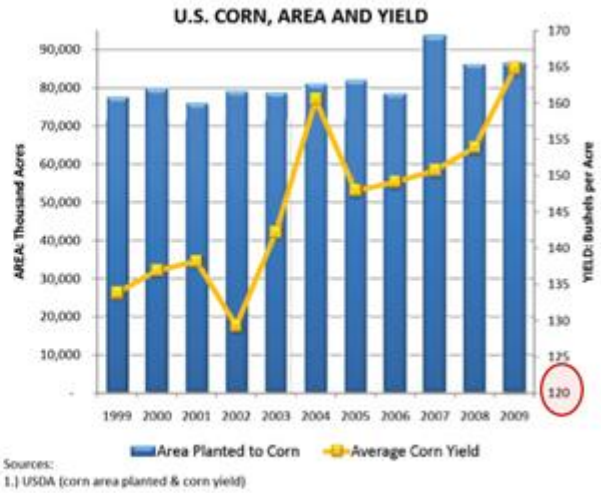

This article was originally published on June 28, 2010 on SweeterAlternative.com.

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