



THIS WEEK'S *LiveWire* PREVIEW STORY

Corn producers, others battle back against attack by putting their money where their mouths are

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

If local industry officials and lawmakers are fighting the war on ethanol with facts, Jackson County corn producers and the citizens who rely on area farmers for their living are fighting back with bucks.

More specifically, both are pouring money into two of the most visible showings of support for ethanol — the corn-based fuel itself and the vehicles equipped to use as much of it as possible.

Flex-fuel motor vehicles are among the most sought-after automobiles at Kemna-Asa Auto Plaza in Jackson these days and officials with FCA Co-op say ethanol-enriched fuel has been flowing from the new pick-your-blend ethanol pump at the co-op's self-serve fuel station on the east side of town at a staggering rate since it became available this past summer.

Ecology, economy, lifestyle

Rob Hunt, sales consultant with Kemna-Asa, said the reasons for high local interest in ethanol are many and varied, ranging from the noble — a desire to be more eco-friendly — to the practical — a desire to be more economical.

"There's an environmental consideration there, yes," he said, "but there's also an economical consideration there too. Often, these decisions come right down to how it affects the pocketbook."

Denny Bratrud, petroleum manager at FCA, said the same is true of ethanol itself.

"When gas was up in that \$3-per-gallon range and folks were seeing E-85 a buck to a buck-20 cheaper, it was a no-brainer," he said. "There was an absolutely tremendous demand at that point."

But perhaps the main reason why flex-fuel vehicles and ethanol are such hot commodities in Jackson County stems from the fact that this is corn country, plain and simple.

"I've talked to farmers who were looking for a new truck who specifically requested a flex-fuel model, just because they figure they raise the corn, so they think it's only right that they use the corn they raise in their vehicles," Hunt said. "It's pride in livelihood, pride in product and just a smart cycle that really seems to make sense to local farmers and other folks in town and beyond who realize that farming is the main economic drive behind Jackson and Jackson County."

That mindset is also evident to Bratrud, especially now that the price spread between ethanol and regular gasoline has shrunk dramatically. Even as demand for the higher-percentage ethanol blends at the Jackson pump has tapered slightly in recent weeks as the price of regular unleaded gasoline has plummeted, Bratrud said there are those out there who are stuck on E-85, the highest-percentage ethanol blend available.

"When the spread between E-85 and regular was up in that \$1.20-per-gallon range, there was a tremendous demand for the higher-percentage ethanol blends," he said. "Now that the spread is down to between 11 and 22 cents, the demand has fallen off a bit, but there are still those die-hards out there who put in E-85 no matter what. It's the mentality that 'I grow this corn, it pays my bills and I'll use it no matter what.' For a lot of these people, it actually has become part of their lifestyle."

Recent change

If flex-fuel vehicles and the ethanol-enriched gasoline that powers them are ingrained parts of local folks' lifestyles today, it's a relatively new change in mindset.

As recently as a half-decade ago, many Jackson County folks were still driving around in gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles and pickup trucks and demanding such low fuel-economy modes of transportation from local auto dealers at an alarming rate.

"I've been in this business seven years," Hunt said, "and I saw the day of the big gas-guzzlers. Then, that all started to change."

It's been over the last four to five years, Hunt said, that a lot more folks in the market for a vehicle began ask-

WAR ON ETHANOL



PART II OF A TWO-PART SERIES

Last week: Fighting back with facts

This week: Fighting back with bucks



FLEX-FUEL FAVORITES

Five of today's most popular flex-fuel options among local folks at Jackson's Kemna-Asa Auto Plaza.

Photos by Justin Lessman

Illustration by Vicki Beckendorf



ing first about fuel economy and then about flex-fuel engines.

While a newfound concern for the environment played a part, Hunt said, and ideological support for the ethanol industry and local farmers did as well to even more of a degree, the catalyst was undoubtedly \$3 gas.

"When gas prices hit \$3, that seemed to be the magical number," he said. "Everybody got nervous, everybody got concerned, everybody suddenly got interested in flex-fuel vehicles. Suddenly we were getting SUV and pickup trade-ins, you saw people jumping models just to get a flex-fuel engine and everybody was asking about the technology."

Everybody in the Midwest, anyway.

From here to everywhere

"While Minnesota and this part of the country were talking flex-fuel, you saw the rest of the country talking hybrids," Hunt said. "That's simply because we have more flex-fuel pumps here than anybody else does. It stands to reason that the corn is grown here, the ethanol is produced here, the fuel is sold here."

In fact, Hunt said he and the rest of the sales crew at Kemna-Asa saw and continue to see interest in and sales of flex-fuel vehicles increase in direct proportion to the number of ethanol plants and pumps around the area.

Interest was already high this past August when FCA installed Jackson's first blender pump at its east-Jackson fuel station. It grew when FCA dedicated the new pump with a huge three-hour discount promotion.

"I think a lot of interest in ethanol blends and ethanol in general was gen-

erated by that," Bratrud said. "According to pump statistics, a lot of people made the switch to their preferred blend at that point and have generally stuck to it ever since."

Ethanol awareness was further increased over the past few months through the one-year anniversary celebration at Jackson County's Heron Lake BioEnergy plant in August and the grand-opening celebration at the Green Plains Renewable Energy plant just across the Jackson County border in Superior, Iowa, a month later.

Hunt and Bratrud predict interest will only continue to spread.

"Ethanol and the flex-fuel vehicles that use it are becoming more mainstream," Hunt said. "When it was Minnesota and Iowa and the Midwest pushing for more flex-fuel options in some of the most popular models, it was easy for the big car manufacturers to overlook us. There was a great need for the demand to bleed out and it's starting to do so. GM and Chrysler are starting to hear cries from New York and Texas and Chicago and beyond and are starting to listen. The nation is clamoring to get E-85-equipped engines in their favorite vehicles and it's finally happening."

In fact, Hunt says it won't be long before flex-fuel engines are standard in all makes and models.

"Up until recently, I was still hearing folks ask me 'If I'm never going to use it, then why even get it?'" Hunt said. "My question was 'Why not get it just in case?' Now you're not hearing that as much. People are finally learning enough about the technology to know they can run ethanol in their flex-fuel vehicle if they want or regular unleaded if they want."

The 'answer we've been looking for'

With awareness and appreciation of the corn-based fuel increasing not only in Minnesota, but also across the nation, both Hunt and Bratrud are confident their industries will weather the recent attacks on ethanol by the mass media and others.

"The flex-fuel option is just so popular right now," Hunt said. "I can't see it falling out of favor anytime soon, especially here in this area where ethanol is such a big part of our economy and, really, our way of life."

Bratrud agrees.

"Ethanol is such a good thing — for our economy, for our environment, for our neighbors here in Jackson County," he said. "I think it's the answer we've been looking for."

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County to add jobs

International Transmission Co. has located its new maintenance and materials storage facility in the former Kraft building located just west of Highway 86 next to Kozy Heat Fireplaces manufacturing facility in Lakefield. For the past month the company has been getting the new location modified and it is nearing completion now. *Story, page A6*



JCC students to perform Hansel and Gretel

Several Jackson County Central students have been practicing for their performance of Hansel and Gretel. The play is scheduled for tomorrow (Friday) and Saturday. *Story, page B3*