

Rising Gasoline prices: Put hemp in your tank

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While George Bush Sr. didn't face the same sort of energy crisis that George Bush Jr. now faces — with OPEC scrooging the oil supply and Venezuela getting uppity with its share of the black-gold mine — he did more than rattle sabers on the pretext of stopping one. The Gulf War, so preached by pundits galore, was all about oil; got to keep the lifeblood of American commerce pumping, right?

Sort of.

Before smart-bombing the daylights out of Iraq, Bush had a smart plan to wean America off of oil, at least partially (can't let all those family oil wells go bust, now can we?). On June 12, 1989, the self-proclaimed "environmental president," unveiled a plan to cut down on air pollution caused by petrol fuels.

"Too many Americans continue to breathe dirty air," said the elder Bush, "and political paralysis has plagued further progress against air pollution. We've seen enough of this stalemate. It's time to clear the air."

How? Why switching to methanol, of course — what Bush tagged, "[home-grown energy for America.](#)" Gives you kind of a warm, patriotic feeling, doesn't it? Turning our own trees to fuel (methanol being alcohol made from wood) makes more sense than relying on fickle foreign cartels like OPEC and even more fickle domestic cartels like the U.S. Department of Energy. Unfortunately, like so many other things in the Bush presidency, what started out good, spoiled in the end. Along with bombing Iraq, Bush also bombed his energy policy. Despite all his gallant (and probably disingenuous) efforts, alternative non-petrol fuels remained on the drawing board, far from the gas tanks of Americans.

Pity. It's true, while most of us don't enjoy huffing sulfur dioxide, most of us don't really want to mess around with alternative fuels like methanol, either. And then there are those who, to paraphrase the famous Monte Python ditty, think, "Every tree is sacred. Every tree is great. If a tree is wasted, God gets quite irate." So, that puts the axe to methanol.

But now, at the start of the Bush Jr. presidency, there might be some serious economic incentive to look for something other than petrol. With the current crimp in energy, looking for an alternative would be — in the catchword of the Bush Sr. presidency — "prudent."

Surprising to some, no doubt, a very good possibility is hemp. Granted, putting a reefer in your tank hardly seems like a sensible idea. What if the Chrysler gets stoned and starts weaving between lanes? Not going to happen. Hemp fuel is about as intoxicating as a jug of Mazola.

And hemp has a lot going for it as a fuel.

Rudolf Diesel, the inventor of the diesel engine, designed it to run on vegetable and seed oils like hemp; he actually ran the thing on peanut oil for the 1900 World's Fair. Henry Ford used hemp to not only construct cars but also fuel them.

As an alternative to methanol, hemp has at least one glowing report: the plant produces up to four times more cellulose per acre than trees. And a hemp crop grows a little quicker than a forest.

As for an alternative to petroleum,

- Hemp grows like mad from border to border in America; so shortages are unlikely. And, unlike petrol, unless we run out of soil, hemp is renewable.
- Growing and harvesting the stuff has much less environmental impact than procuring oil.
- Hemp fuel is biodegradable; so oil spills become fertilizer not eco-catastrophes.
- Hemp fuel does not contribute to sulfur dioxide air poisoning.
- Other noxious emissions like carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons are radically slashed by using "biodiesel."
- Hemp fuel is nontoxic and only a mild skin irritant; anybody who's ever cleaned out an old carburetor with gasoline can confirm the same is not true for petrol.
- Growing hemp for fuel would be a tremendous boon for American farmers and the agricultural industry, as opposed to people like, say, the Bush family.

And that's why hemp might not go anywhere as a fuel alternative. Oil interests are big and donate likewise to politicians, and selling a man on an idea that will cost him more than he'll benefit requires an amazingly skilled orator — or a gun. Unfortunately, unless you're the federal government, gunpoint conversions are usually illegal. Ergo, PR is about the best bet right now.

There are many people working hard on this front, including the [Hemp Car](#) and its intrepid crew. Currently ginning up for a trans-America evangelism tour, the Hemp Car plans to spread the good word of hemp-fuel viability at stops in both the U.S. and Canada.

For whatever good it will do, they should make sure to stop by Washington, D.C., and have a word with President George W. Bush. The current oil crisis and our nation's dependency on sometimes-persnickety foreign sources might find the new chief executive with an open mind to fuel sources other than Texas tea — regardless of his oily bank accounts. And, while salvaging his dad's legacy is not Goal 1 for Dubya, it might also help him look more forward thinking in terms of energy policy and the environment.

Of course, hemp fuel may never take off. It might dry up like all those hemp crops left unattended after the feds banned their cultivation in the 1930s. One way or the other, Bush

should consider freeing up the market to innovate with alternative fuels like hemp oil — it couldn't hurt, and it stands the chance to help. In so doing, he'll end his term with a far better moniker than the "environmental president." For, if other policy decisions he makes go in a similar direction, we can perhaps call him the "free-market president."

Then he can definitely say to his old man, "Gotcha there, pops."

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