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The Rightful Place of Science: Biofuels

John A. Alic

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Biofuels examines prospects for large-scale production of affordable, sustainable transportation fuels. Made from biomass or other alternatives to oil, such fuels would not add greenhouse gases to Earth's atmosphere or compete with food crops. Concise and authoritative, avoiding the hyperbole that surrounds so many energy technology proposals, *Biofuels* concentrates on essentials:

• How technological innovation actually takes place, not only through research but in response to market forces and business decisions.

• The dynamics of the global oil industry, which on the one hand supplies billions of people with relatively low-cost energy and on the other imperils many of these same people through climate change.

• Prospects for "drop-in" alternatives to petroleum that can be burned in existing vehicles and equipment, avoiding the need to turn over a fleet that in the United States alone numbers some 250 million cars and trucks.

• US government policies for fostering innovation, in energy and more broadly, and the strengths of the Defense Department relative to other agencies in supporting technological advance and scale-up of alternative fuels.

Biofuels locates the central question for policy in the multitude of pathways for making fuels from biomass or other non-petroleum feedstocks, including natural gas. Because so many of these technologies are immature, and others little more than hypothesized, costs and environment impacts cannot be known. Policymakers have stumbled over these uncertainties, on the one hand subsidizing unsustainable fuels such as corn ethanol and on the other hoping that visionary "breakthroughs" will somehow emerge from science and research to resolve the conundrums of energy and climate. Needless to say research is indispensable. Yet sound policies, Biofuels argues, must also promote near-term alternatives to petroleum that do not require major changes to vehicles and infrastructure—something that the Defense Department, seemingly alone within government, recognizes. Defense agencies, moreover, have great technological capacity, understand in a very practical sense how successful innovation occurs, and know how to work with the private firms that will bring innovations to market. Of course the Pentagon sometimes goes wrong, and military-driven innovation has not been cheap. But then innovation almost by definition is costly and disruptive. By capitalizing on military demand, Biofuels concludes, the US government could speed innovation, help the nation's own economy grow, and add to the toolkit available worldwide for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

From the Forward by Clark A. Miller
"Creating a new energy industry is one of the most complex enterprises human societies have ever sought to undertake. Biofuels is essential reading for those interested in these questions."

From the back cover

"This short volume provides a cogent and insightful assessment of the perils, pitfalls and possibilities for biofuels [suggesting] how difficult it will be to make biofuels tenable in the long run without major subsidies

and technical breakthroughs."
C. Ford Runge, Distinguished McKnight University Professor of Applied Economics and Law, University of Minnesota.

"Alic is also an optimist, and he presents a convincing pathway for sensible military and government investment in incremental biofuel innovations."
Lisa Margonelli, author of Oil On The Brain: Petroleum's Long, Strange Trip to Your Tank.

"Alic applies his considerable expertise to move debates about biofuels beyond the simplistic notion that governments should avoid picking winners—and instead focuses on how to design policy to encourage innovation while acknowledging the diverse set of goals that changes to transportation fuels might address."
Professor Greg Nemet, Chair, Energy Analysis and Policy, University of Wisconsin.

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