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opinion

Feed your car or your turkey?

By Joel Brandenberger

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This December, tens of millions of Americans will face sticker shock at the grocery store when they go food shopping for their holiday meal.

For those of us in the turkey industry, it will be a bittersweet season as well.

As turkey companies once again take pride in putting delicious, nutritious and affordable turkeys on America's holiday tables, the industry is going through one of its worst years ever.

There is a common link behind the high prices facing consumers and the tough times for turkey and other animal agriculture industries: government policies that subsidize the conversion of one-third of all U.S. corn to make ethanol.

Changing those policies in the 111th Congress would help ease food price inflation over the long run and shore up animal agriculture, while also speeding the development of more advanced clean-fuel solutions that don't drive up the price of food.

It is hard to believe, but corn ethanol has been the recipient of government subsidies for 30 years. The theory was that these subsidies would help the industry stand on its own feet so America could grow the fuel we need, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and help the environment. The reality has been disappointing.

Three decades and nearly \$30 billion later, the corn ethanol industry still relies on subsidies; a protective tariff on less expensive, more efficient foreign biofuels; and a government mandate in order to survive. Despite this generous support, corn ethanol has still barely displaced 4 percent of our nation's gasoline consumption.

While ethanol is failing to deliver on its promise of energy independence, it is dealing a tough blow to food producers and consumers. This problem is especially acute for poultry producers.

Turkeys and chickens rely heavily on corn, which represents up to 70 percent of the cost of raising a bird. With ethanol policies diverting so much corn for fuel, feed prices have more than doubled in the past two years.

This sharp escalation in feed costs has forced turkey producers nationwide to cut production. In rural communities across America, thousands of industry workers have lost their jobs.

And as turkey producers are forced to reduce production, the supply of turkey meat in the

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market is poised to drop sharply next year.

That corn prices have retreated recently to less than \$4 per bushel offers no near-term relief.

Most of this fall and winter's corn was bought during the summer, when prices were much higher. And, even when producers can buy cheaper corn, the overall economy may limit production increases.

That means that as tough as high food prices are now, they may get much worse. In fact, one prominent agricultural economist predicts that under existing ethanol policies food price inflation may top 9 percent per year for the coming years.

For families already struggling in today's tough economy, that kind of rampant, sustained food price inflation is a serious threat.

To be sure, Congress cannot simply legislate food price inflation away. Factors such as growing global demand, changing weather patterns and rising energy prices are simply not under our control.

But our ethanol policies, which divert billions of bushels of corn and millions of acres of cropland for fuel production, are under our control.

The promise of biofuels is still real. But we won't fulfill that promise by continuing to provide government support for corn ethanol.

Instead, we should take that money and invest in advanced biofuel solutions from non-food sources. By doing so, we can achieve the goal set out 30 years ago of creating a home grown solution for our nation's energy needs.

This holiday season, let's look at the feast on our table and remember that the miracle of abundant, affordable food was the result of a partnership between our nation's farmers and our policymakers.

It is up to Congress to adjust course so that next year we don't find that turkeys (and other meats) are a treat we can afford only on special occasions.

Joel Brandenberger is president of the National Turkey Federation.

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