E15 Misdirection (WSJ letter from farm-state US senators)

By Robert Bradley Jr. -- July 22, 2026

"Is" certainly does not equal "ought." The market has *not* spoken. The senators do not have an intellectual case for agricultural rent-seeking and crony capitalism. The way forward, as Travis Fisher of the Cato Institute explains, is to abolish the mandate and let a free market determine the right (lower) amount of ethanol needed as an oxygenate.

Apologists for uneconomical, government-dependent energies (a federally mandated ethanol mandate in this case) must use the best arguments they can conjure up, especially any that might appear plausible to the short-attention-span reader. The half-truth can do this, with the truth part setting up the deception. Another ploy is the "is" as if it is "ought."

Consider the letter published in the *Wall Street Journal* last month by five farm state senators **[1]**, "The Market Has Spoken: E15 Is a Net Positive" (June 4, 2026). It concerns the federal ethanol mandate that violates natural market choices. My comments follow each paragraph.

> "Regarding your editorial 'An Ethanol Extortion Play' (May 11): When we talk with our constituents, we hear about high gas and diesel prices. We have a solution that will bring down fuel prices for Americans: E15 fuel, 15% ethanol, 85% gasoline. Legislation allowing year round, nationwide sales of E15 has bipartisan support in the House and Senate. Opponents, the most vocal of which are a handful of oil refineries, are trying to stop it. Your editorial mirrors their misguided talking points."

Comment: "We have a solution that will bring down fuel prices" is a sneaky half-truth. The lower price for ethanol is cancelled out and more by less fuel economy versus a higher gasoline blend. As AI states:

"While high-ethanol blends (like **E15**) frequently cost less at the pump, they do not reliably save motorists money. Ethanol contains less energy per gallon than pure gasoline, resulting in a 2-3% drop in fuel economy for **E10** and up to a 5% drop for **E15**, ultimately erasing the pump savings."

If ethanol really saves consumers money, other things the same, then there would not need to be a quota backed by the letter's legislative bodyguards.

> “Expanding E15 availability lowers gas prices by 20 to 40 cents per gallon on average. That could mean around $400 per year in savings for a U.S. household—precious dollars that could be spent on other needs.”

Comment: This is flatly incorrect because the authors do not factor in the fuel-economy disadvantage of ethanol–and the opportunity cost of filling up more often. Nor do they bring up the issue of engine damage for small motors and older vehicles from the mandate–or the effect on food prices from the food-to-fuel substitution. The complexity of the Renewable Fuel Standard (the governing name for the mandate) has also been ripe for fraud.

> “E15 has been in the marketplace by presidential waiver for eight years. In that time, not one refinery has closed because of E15 availability. And, for all the talk of smog worries, data from Growth Energy shows E15 reduces smog forming pollutants. Likewise, despite concerns voiced in some quarters, existing fuel infrastructure can be used for E15, just as it can for the E10 fuel Americans usually buy.”

Comment: The environmental case for a higher ethanol blend is, at best, ambiguous. Summer usage *increases* smog in many major cities. CO_2 reductions at the combustion stage compared to gasoline are offset by land usage and conversion for corn. Environmental groups generally oppose the ethanol mandate for these reasons.

> “The market has spoken: E15 is a net positive. We know E15 will lower prices at the pump, and we’re committed to providing affordable options for families. Securing year round, nationwide E15 is at the forefront of our agenda.”

Comment: “Is” certainly does not equal “ought.” The market has *not* spoken. The undersigned do not have an intellectual case for agricultural rent-seeking and crony capitalism. The way forward, as Travis Fisher of the Cato Institute explains, is to abolish the mandate and let a free market determine the right (lower) amount of ethanol needed as an oxygenate.

---

[1] SENS. CHUCK GRASSLEY (R., IOWA), JONI ERNST (R., IOWA), DEB FISCHER (R., NEB.), PETE RICKETTS (R., NEB.) AND ROGER MARSHALL (R., KAN.)