

Don't Hate the Biofuel Player, Hate the Game



By LUKE SIMPSON, Associate Editor

Last Monday I came back to work after three weeks off. In that relatively short period of time, a lot has changed. Firstly, I'm now married to the girl of my dreams and ridiculously excited about spending the rest of my life with such an incredible person.

Secondly, the snow and ice covering Madison, WI has completely subsided, allowing me to pull out the grill in preparation for the 70 degree weather that will apparently arrive at the end of this week. Other changes to get excited about include:

- The House passing the health care reform bill.
- It's now [okay to cycle naked in New Zealand](#) [1].
- The [NFL's new "modified sudden death" overtime rule](#) [2].

So after returning to work with a head full of honeymoon-induced optimism, I was quickly brought back down to earth by a bunch of glass-half-empty colleagues and members of the Chem.Info community. The catalyst for these buzzkillers was the [opening of Virent and Shell's biogasoline demonstration plant](#) [3].

"Nice thought. Does it stand a chance or is this *another* plant that is great in theory, but impossible in practice," quipped the editor of our sister publication, [PD&D](#) [4], adding, "How many demonstration plants will we have before we start adopting these technologies as mainstream?"

"How much will this cost?" enquired another reader, hinting at the common conception that these technologies are not viable in terms of cost or net energy production across the entire lifecycle.

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Later in the week, our coverage of the [proposed fast nuclear reactors](#) [5] (a.k.a. traveling-wave reactors), with their ability to run on depleted fuel in the form of recycled nuclear waste, prompted suspicion from one reader, who asked "How about the thorium reactors that were such a promise a few years back?"

Well, the thorium reactors are still around. In fact, the [Thorium Energy Security Act of 2010](#) [6] was introduced in the Senate earlier this month, providing the framework required to develop thorium-based nuclear fuel for existing and future reactors.

And the chances of us ever buying biogasoline at the pump? Who knows?

With so many good theoretical solutions for clean-energy production floating around, we have every right to be impatient and skeptical. That's right, I'm back on [Murphy's](#) [7] side with his army of pessimistic followers.

Biofuel companies appear to be the worst of the renewable fuel seekers in terms of pumping up their own abilities. The tone of their press releases often implies that the technology is so airtight that scaling up and commercialization are mere formalities. Terms like "CO2 neutral," "water positive" and "low lifecycle emissions" are used to make us believe that we are looking at *the* solution.

As for Virent, I find the idea of a renewable fossil fuel (biogasoline) too much of a contradiction to take seriously, but I would welcome any data that shows it to be a serious competitor for ethanol or biodiesel in terms of net energy output, cost and reduced CO2 emissions.

The thing to remember is that an abundance of "good" scientific ideas and the funding necessary to see if they work in the real world are good things. We'll just have to get used to exaggerated press releases, overenthusiastic marketing executives and overconfident CEOs.

In other words: Don't hate the player, hate the game.

Join the growing community of skeptics on Chem.Info by airing your views using the comment field below each news story (registration simply requires a name, username, password and e-mail address). Otherwise, you can let me know what you think about biogasoline by e-mailing me at luke.simpson@advantagemedia.com [8].

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[1] <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/03/kiwi-biker-right-to-bicycle-naked.php>

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[3] <http://chem.info/News/2010/03/Alternative-Energy-Virent-Shell-Open-Biogasoline-Demonstration-Plant/>

[4] <http://www.pddnet.com/>

[5] <http://www.chem.info/Multimedia/Video/2010/03/topics-alternative-energy-slow-pace-for-nuclear-renaissance/>

[6] <http://metalsplace.com/news/articles/33271/senators-push-for-thorium-use-in-reactors/>

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murphy's_law

[8] <mailto:luke.simpson@advantagemedia.com>