

WE FIGHT FOR THE OIL WE NEED TO FIGHT FOR THE OIL¹

Emily Badger[©]

Researchers and government regulators have long felt they had the life cycle analysis of oil pretty well covered. Crude must be extracted and shipped across the ocean in supertankers or pumped underground through pipelines. It's processed in a refinery, then transported again and ultimately burned in your car. Each step contributes to the footprint of a commodity that generates greenhouse gases well beyond what spits out a tailpipe in the end.

Now a pair of researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln want the Environmental Protection Agency to include an oft-ignored indirect source of oil's emissions: the military protection essential to getting the stuff here from the Middle East. Other studies have estimated the U.S. military's expense defending the volatile regions of the world that produce fuel for American cars and the shipping lanes that tankers travel to get here. The National Defense Council Foundation has pegged the U.S. military subsidy to protect the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf at about \$50 billion a year. A RAND report last year estimated 12-15 percent of the annual defense budget could be saved "if all concerns for securing oil from the Persian Gulf should disappear."

UNL researchers, Adam Liska and Richard Perrin, go one step further, calculating the emissions from these military activities that they say should be considered in policy discussions weighing the footprint of gasoline against biofuels. They figure that protecting oil transport in the Persian Gulf produces the equivalent of 34.4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide a year.

THE IDEA LOBBY

Miller-McCune's Washington correspondent, Emily Badger, follows the ideas informing, explaining and influencing government, from the local think tank circuit to academic research that shapes D.C. policy from afar. Waging the war in Iraq releases another 43.3 million metric tons annually — a more controversial point whose relevance depends on why you believe the U.S. went into Iraq in the first place. In total, military operations raise the greenhouse gas intensity of oil from the Middle East by 8-18 percent, the researchers argue in the journal *Environment*. Past calculations, they write, "have been faulty because warships are to oil what combine harvesters are to biofuels."

Their proposed adjustment isn't just an academic exercise. The 2007 Energy Independence and Security Act requires renewable fuels to have significantly lower life cycle greenhouse gas emissions than their fossil fuel counterparts (20 percent lower for corn ethanol, 60 percent lower for cellulosic biofuels). This year, the EPA has been finalizing its formula for the calculation, which will include for biofuels indirect emissions sources such as land-use change. So far, the EPA has rejected Liska and Perrin's calls to include military protection among oil's indirect emissions, citing "the widely speculative nature of such an assessment." Liska believes the resistance is partly political.

¹ Miller-McCune newsletter, July 27, 2010

“The discussion in Washington, and the general discussion in America, about the connection between oil and the military is not developed enough,” he said. “It’s all been hijacked by the war on terrorism. [People] think, ‘We’re in the Middle East to fight terrorists.’” To suggest otherwise, post-9/11, would be taboo. But Liska rattles off a number of citations from government documents and presidential speeches stating just that. Such as this one, from a 1995 Department of Defense document, “United States Security Strategy for the Middle East,” quoted in the RAND report: “Our paramount national security interest in the Middle East is maintaining the unhindered flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to world markets at stable prices.” Today, however, it may be difficult to include the cost of keeping that flow unhindered in any analysis of oil’s life cycle because we’re nervous acknowledging that’s one of the roles of the military.

The result may be that biofuels have the deck stacked against them in any head-to-head comparison with oil (in reaching this conclusion, Liska is quick to add that his research was not funded by the ethanol industry). “I want to change the dialogue about biofuels and about where we’re at,” he said. What if we weigh biofuels not as competition for the food supply, but as an alternative to energy sources requiring costly military protection?

The circular logic then gets a little mind-boggling, particularly in light of another statistic the DoD readily admits: The American military is the world’s largest purchaser and user of oil. It is, in part, consuming large quantities of oil (and emitting greenhouse gases) in the service of escorting crude from the Middle East to the U.S. — crude that has a good chance of ultimately being consumed by, well, the military.