

We agree that applying best practice standards to crop production is vital to ensuring that renewable fuels are produced in a sustainable manner (“Sustainable Biofuels Redux,” 3 Oct. 2008). Biotechnology enables both advanced biofuels and sustainable crop practices, such as no-till agriculture.

The biofuels industry pioneered the use of life cycle assessment for energy use and greenhouse gas emission and is leading efforts to establish sustainability standards, through groups such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels and the Council for Sustainable Biomass Production.

If we are to chart a low-carbon economy, as the authors call for, it must be based on efforts such as these and it must be global in scope. Identifying unintended consequences early in the development of advanced biofuels can only help to avoid environmental regret if there is global cooperation on implementing best practices.

So, let’s be clear about what we mean by the term “carbon debt.” This is atmospheric carbon generated by the expansion of agriculture throughout the world to meet increased demand (for food, feed and fiber as well as biofuels) and to take advantage of higher prices for agricultural production. The work of many of the authors affirms that the only effective way to control and mitigate excessive carbon release from agricultural expansion is through widespread adoption of best practices and biotechnology for agriculture.

The United States must lead the world in adopting these best practices. But the foreseeable consequences of imposing regulation on U.S. cellulosic biofuels in isolation will be to prevent the industry from ever getting off the ground, which will result in continuing “business as usual.”

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