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Oregon can help lead the way on ethanol

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ALTERNATIVE ENERGY

Add benzene to the long list of reasons the Oregon Legislature should move quickly to pass Gov. Ted Kulongoski's proposed renewable fuels legislation. Instead of waiting until 2015 for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new rules to reduce benzene emissions from gasoline to take effect ("A big sigh of relief for NW air," Feb. 10), the state can reduce benzene and other air quality concerns this year by requiring gasoline sold in the state to contain 10 percent ethanol.

Legislation introduced in the House -- HB 2210 and 2211 -- includes incentives and renewable fuel standards to make Oregon a national leader in the production and use of fuels such as biodiesel and ethanol. The legislation offers a tremendous opportunity to reduce emissions that contribute to global warming, to reduce reliance on foreign oil and to create sustainable economic development opportunities in rural Oregon communities that need them the most.

One feature of the legislation offers additional benefits: It requires oil companies to blend conventional gasoline with 10 percent ethanol. Such a requirement would reduce the need for toxic components such as benzene and other aromatics used to boost octane. Benzene is a cancer-causing compound, linked to leukemia and other health problems. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality ranks benzene among the top three air quality concerns Oregon faces.

Ethanol would provide the necessary octane boost to gasoline while helping it burn more cleanly. EPA analyses show that a 10 percent ethanol blend can reduce benzene emissions by 25 percent compared with conventional gasoline.

Although ethanol alone won't solve all the air quality problems associated with automobiles, it could play a central role in Oregon's effort to create a more sustainable and secure fuel supply. Ethanol is produced from corn and other crops by converting a plant's natural sugars to a renewable fuel. The current domestic production of about 5 billion gallons of ethanol allowed the United States to reduce the amount of oil it would have imported last year (170 million gallons by some estimates), invested \$11 billion in home-grown fuel as opposed to exporting dollars to often-hostile regions of the world, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 8 million tons.

Emerging technology to produce ethanol from wood waste, agricultural waste and other sources of cellulose has potential to "green" our energy supply even further.

The Oregon Department of Energy estimates the economic impact from ethanol and biodiesel production in Oregon in the next two years will be \$450 million to \$600 million, yielding more than 500 jobs. When construction is completed this summer, Pacific Ethanol's biorefinery in Boardman, the first in Oregon, will employ 35 full-time employees and produce 40 million gallons of ethanol annually. It also will supply quality feed to dairy farms in the region and provide a market for farmers to grow corn and other crops to be converted into fuel.

With fast action, the Oregon Legislature can ensure we read fewer headlines about the impacts of benzene

pollution, global warming and other environmental concerns in the state and instead ensure Oregon is leading the way in creating a healthier environment and vital, sustainable economy.

Neil Koehler is chief executive officer and president of Pacific Ethanol Inc., a West Coast renewable fuel company with a regional headquarters in Portland. The company is building Oregon's first ethanol plant in Boardman, scheduled to be completed this summer.