What do Fidel Castro and Tillamook Cheese farmers have in common?

They can count, and know the difference between food for working people vs. gasoline for wealthy gas-wasters.

We have a fantasy that we can continue wasteful patterns of living indefinitely. Someone will find a magical "technological-fix", and we can keep on gunning down the freeway.

Lots of people will offer a "fix". But watch out for strings attached. George Bush came up with a magical answer. "Ethanol-blended gasoline." He claims we can produce 35 billion gallons a year of ethanol and other alternative fuels by 2017.

A suspicious source of solutions? Guy Caruso, Bush's own head of the federal Energy Information Administration, says that's fantasy - we can't produce a third that much. But when you've got an addiction, you don't question. You don't ask how many acres that takes from food crops. Already this year, farmers are expecting to plant 12 million more acres of corn than last year. Don't ask why Bush is going to Third World countries to sign ethanol agreements.

Okay, we'll make ethanol out of corn, and run our cars on that. Whew! Now we can relax again. Hit the gas pedal! But it takes gasoline to run the tractors and ethanol converters. And what happens when farmers can get more for ethanol than for cattle feed or people feed?

Already, grain prices are doubling - up $40-60/ton over last year. Farmers aren't getting the money. They've already sold next year's crop on the futures market. Double the feed prices, and Tillamook dairy farmers are headed for bankruptcy. Already several farmers have had to sell their herds. Yes, these bad dreams come home to roost. Right here in Tillamook Cow-ney.

So, we'll import ethanol from other countries!!! Now, where did that great idea come from? It's cheap oil that has fueled our plundering of other countries, flying strawberries 10,000 miles so we can have our sweets.

If we can pay more for corn to drive our cars than for dairy cow feed or people feed, we can probably pay more for corn from poor countries than can people who need it for

food. Filling the 25-gallon tank of an SUV with pure ethanol requires over 450 pounds of corn – which contains enough calories to feed a person for a year.

"Condemned to Premature Death by Hunger and Thirst, More Than 3 Billion People of the World," says Castro. Before you write him off, remember Cuba has produced ethanol from sugar cane for 25 years. They know the tradeoffs. If rich nations import huge amounts of food crops such as corn from developing countries to help meet energy needs, it could have disastrous consequences for the world's poor.

"Apply this recipe to the countries of the Third World and you will see how many people among the hungry masses of our planet will no longer consume corn," Castro said. "Or even worse: by offering financing to poor countries to produce ethanol from corn or any other kind of plant, no tree will be left to defend humanity from climate change." And the rest of us? Studies are showing that ethanol generates worse atmospheric pollution than gasoline.

Who's making a killing? Follow the money trail. DC corn and ethanol lobbies set up Bush's policy. And, of course, tax subsidies for both of them. And the futures market? Fund traders are speculating, driving up prices, pocketing the $$$$.

So, what DOES work? Look at the whole picture. We subsidize domestic oil production with tax depletion allowances so we use oil up faster, and lock ourselves into energy-dependent patterns of agriculture, business, and land use. We're creating an ever-more-astronomical foreign-trade deficit, importing foreign oil to make up for our now-empty wells. And have nothing to trade back, because we're too lazy to make efficient automobiles, homes, and products demanded by people who pay full price for oil.

So let's get off it. Admit the era of wanton waste is over. Eliminate depletion allowances. Tax oil use to world price levels. Pay more, use less. Get efficient. Send market signals to live closer to work, make where we are paradise rather than wandering aimlessly around the world looking for happiness. Focus on people, not products, for happiness. Ban advertising urging more consumption. Use oil taxes to finance efficiency and renewables, and pay off our foreign debt. There's more fun in life, anyhow, than sitting in a car hour after hour.