

Biofuels: Fooling Europe?

The Portuguese Presidency will oversee some tough decisions on plant-based “biofuels” in the next six months.

In March this year, the European Union jumped in at the deep end, pledging to replace 10% of its transport fuel market with biofuels by 2020. EU governments’ eyes light up at the idea of biofuels because they believe them to be carbon neutral – burning them should release no more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than the plants absorbed as they were growing. And as they have the potential to be grown by farmers worldwide, they could solve the problem of oil and gas supply security.

But since March, the EU looks increasingly out of its depth. Environmental and development groups had been flagging up the darker side to biofuels and in May, the UN added its words of warning: Accelerated deforestation to make space to plant biofuels could actually lead to a net increase in carbon dioxide emissions; the prices of food, land and agricultural commodities could be driven up, with major impacts in poorer countries; and biodiversity, water, air and soil quality could all be damaged.

The target agreed in March was conditional on “sustainable production” of biofuels. But the European Commission’s proposed system to ensure sustainability looks worryingly flimsy – it will not address the possible social impacts of biofuels in developing countries, and would rely on trusting exporter countries (which profit from selling biofuels and often have records of poor governance) to stick to sustainability criteria. Committing to 10% before the definition of the sustainability criteria created the risk that weaker criteria will be developed in order to make that goal more achievable. And naming 10% was a blind step into the unknown – no similar targets have been set for curbing overall transport fuel use, so we don’t know what the total volume of fuel used will be in 2020, and it is therefore impossible to guarantee that 10% of this can be produced without causing social and environmental havoc.

Over the coming months, the EU does have a chance to back peddle on the rigid 10% target and approach the biofuels issue more laterally, as the 2003 Biofuels Directive and the 1998 Fuel Quality Directive are both being revised.

The European Commission has proposed - within the revised Fuel Quality Directive - that lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions of road fuels must decrease by 10% by 2020. A lifecycle approach takes into account the whole process of producing and refining the fuel, and with biofuels will cover the emissions from chemical fertilisers and the effects of land use changes. It is crucial that this remains in the legislation, as it should steer the biofuel industry to deliver maximum climate benefits instead of maximum litres of fuel. It also puts pressure

on the oil industry to move away from producing fuels from dirty sources like tar sands, for which the process of extraction emits three times as much carbon dioxide as regular oil exploration.

But even this won't stop the razing of forests and detrimental impacts on food sovereignty and human rights, which is why the EU must tread very carefully indeed. Friends of the Earth Europe is pushing for the mandatory 10% target to be dropped and for all financial support for biofuels to be frozen until the situation is reassessed. In the meantime, the policy focus should be shifted to more cost-effective solutions to reduce transport emissions – investment in public transport, increased use of non-motorised vehicles, improvement in vehicle fuel-efficiency and changes in urban planning and land use.

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