ActionAid Interntional and Friends of the Earth Europe

7 October 2011, Brussels. Press briefing

Beware vested interests: listen to science on biofuels, not industry lobbyists

European biofuels policies contribute to food insecurity and land grabs. Moreover, the true impacts of expanding biofuels production on deforestation and the climate are ignored in the EU policy. Vested corporate interests want to keep it that way.

What's the problem?

When land used for food or feed production is turned over to growing biofuel crops for Europe, agriculture has to expand elsewhere – often into forests and habitats in South America and Southeast Asia – resulting in substantial greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, as well as deforestation, and loss of biodiversity: 'indirect land use change' (ILUC). This is currently not accounted for when the carbon balance for biofuels is calculated.

Science clearly shows that, if EU policy does not change to close the loophole, most biofuel feed stocks will overall be worse for the climate than fossil fuels, as a result of the knock-on effects of ILUC. The EU must regulate these effects by introducing robust ILUC factors (differentiated by feed stocks) before more damage is caused.

Yet some industry groups are trying to discredit the real science in order to maintain business as usual and to keep subsidies going. European decision-makers should listen to scientists,[1] not to narrow corporate interests, when designing biofuels policies.

Myths behind the biofuel industry's claims

Despite the overwhelming evidence, there are still people in industry and elsewhere who claim that biofuels do not adversely affect land use change and GHG emissions. Below is a selection of some of their claims and our response:

Claim 1 The concept of indirect land use change is scientifically unproven. ILUC is an elusive concept based on subjective modelling. EU legislation on ILUC would be unwarranted.

Reality 1 Numerous scientific studies[2] have warned about the unintended consequences for forests, biodiversity and the climate of indirect land use changes from increasing biofuels. International scientific institutions (e.g. EEA, EPA, FAO, UNEP, and the EU's own JRC) all agree on the need to address the issue by including ILUC in the GHG calculations for biofuels. It is unwarranted and scientifically flawed for EU legislation to ignore these emissions in the carbon accounting – giving biofuels credit for GHG savings that don't exist.

Claim 2 US authorities have postponed all decisions on ILUC.

Reality 2 Actually, biofuel policies of the United States (the US Environmental Protection Agency) and California (the California Air Resources Board) already account for ILUC emissions, with specific ILUC factors.

Claim 3 We need biofuels for energy security and economic growth.

Reality 3 Any energy security gained from current biofuels comes at the expense of food insecurity, climate change, and large public subsidies – EU governments provided € 3.7

billion of support for biofuels in 2006.[3] Biofuels have contributed significantly to increased food prices and hunger – prompting the World Bank, WTO, IMF and others to call on governments to remove biofuel subsidies and mandates.[4]

Claim 4 EU biodiesel has low ILUC risk.

Reality 4 The IFPRI study[5] and others find that the main biodiesel crops (palmoil, soy, and rapeseed) have the highest ILUC impacts (in the range of 50 g CO2/MJ) – making them equal or worse for the climate than conventional fossil fuel. Even for EU rapeseed, where it is diverted out of food and export markets into the EU fuel market, the additional food oils are likely to be obtained by expanding palmoil and soy production, driving deforestation and emissions.

Claim 5 The EU Renewable Energy Directive contains restrictive measures on biofuel sustainability.

Reality 5 Actually, EU RED criteria are inadequate because they provide no social protection for people; and they miss out the crucial knock-on impacts of expanding biofuels: emissions from indirect land use change, and impacts on food prices and poverty.

Claim 6 The IFPRI study is problematic and does not adequately represent co-products; vegetable oil markets; productivity improvements.

Reality 6 IFPRI modelling is robust and contributes to the best available science. It includes a sophisticated treatment of co-products calibrated to European data; it accurately models the EU vegetable oil market integration into world markets; and it is generous taking account of agricultural yield increases above the observed data.

The conclusion is clear:

- The best available scientific evidence shows that, when land use change is taken into account, biodiesel is responsible for equal or greater climate changing emissions than fossil fuels.
- Introducing robust ILUC factors would be a first step towards properly accounting for some of the unintended, but nevertheless highly harmful, effects of biofuels.
- EU decision makers must act on the science and not pander to vested interests in addressing this issue, if Europe is to be a credible leader in the fight against climate change.

---

[1] See e.g. Union of Concerned Scientists (7 October 2011) http://www.ucsusa.org/euletter; EEA (2011) http://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/governance/scientific-committee/sc-opinions/opinions-on-scientific-issues/sc-opinion-on-greenhouse-gas

[2] E.g. IFPRI (2011), JRC (2010) Indirect land use change from increased biofuels demand http://ec.europa.eu/energy/renewables/consultations/doc/public_consultation_iluc/study_4_iluc_modelling_comparison.pdf

[3] http://www.globalsubsidies.org/biofuel-subsidies-european-union-2010-update

[4] FAO, IFAD, IMF,OECD, World Bank, WTO et al. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/40/34/48152638.pdf

[5] IFPRI (2011) – an independent analysis for the European Commission, leaked to http://www.europeanvoice.com/CWS/Index.aspx?PageID=188&articleID=70930