
Why certification of agrofuels won't work

Arguments in favour of certification often explain that a company wanting to sell its products as sustainably produced has to have some way of proving this. A consumer who wants to buy socially and environmentally friendly products needs a label that they can trust on the products. When the problem is framed in this way, certification seems to be the obvious answer. But the certification of timber products provides three lessons that are important in any consideration of whether certification of agrofuels might help to prevent the worst excesses of a destructive industry.

First, the certification system has to be credible. The standards have to be clear and have to be interpreted consistently by third party certifiers. To prevent a conflict of interest in the assessment, there has to be no commercial relationship between the certifier and the company being certified. In the timber sector, no certification system has achieved these basic requirements.

The products have to be tracked from where they are grown to where they are sold. The problems of developing a rigorous chain of custody control for timber products was pointed out in a 2007 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Part of the problem, notes OECD, is that "Wood is processed into many different products and sourced from many different wood species, origins and owners." Paper mills, for example, can source their wood chips from a wide range of sources (from thinnings from thousands of different forestry operations, waste from a range of sawmills and from recycling schemes). In order to accommodate the industry, in 2004, the Forest Stewardship Council amended its chain of custody certification. The new "mixed sources" label allows FSC's logo to appear on products that contain as little as 10 per cent FSC-certified material.

A label that guarantees that only a small percentage of the product comes from well-managed sources, doesn't indicate the percentage that is actually certified and relies on companies to confirm that the rest is not from destructive monocultures or clearcut forests, is guilty of misleading consumers.

The second lesson is that even if a perfect certification system were to be developed (which has not so far happened), there is nothing to prevent the industry from setting up its own, far weaker, certification scheme. FSC, PEFC, CSA, SFI, AFS, MTCC, LEI, CERFLOR, Certfor – as this alphabet soup shows, this is precisely what has happened with the certification of timber products. NGOs who have spent the last fifteen years wrapping their heads around the pros and cons of the various schemes can tell the difference. Consumers cannot.

Third, while a voluntary certification scheme can reward companies that meet its standards by giving them a "green seal", certification can do nothing to prevent the worst companies from continuing their destructive operations. In theory, if a consumer only buys agrofuel credibly certified as coming from well-managed operations then that consumer will be avoiding buying products that come from vast, chemical-soaked, monoculture plantations. But buying certified agrofuel does not prevent the destruction, because one consumer buying certified products does nothing to prevent others from buying uncertified products.

There is no evidence that any of these lessons from certification of wood products are being applied in the certification of agrofuels. The Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels, run by the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne in Switzerland, is drawing up "sustainability standards for sustainable biofuels" and is currently inviting comments on "Version Zero" of its draft standard. Sitting on the Steering Board is Heiko Liedeker, who was FSC's director from 2001 to 2008. Liedeker consistently ignored reports from WRM and other NGOs explaining how FSC certification of industrial tree plantations was undermining local struggles. Other Steering Board members include oil company representatives, Cameron Rennie of BP, Julio Cesar Pinho of Petrobras and Paloma Berenguer of Shell.

Getting involved in a discussion about the content of the principles and criteria for agrofuel certification may seem like an important thing to do. If the standard is weak enough it will allow the certification of almost any agrofuel plantation. But getting involved in the writing of the standards is to miss the point. The standards will do nothing to prevent the abuses carried out by the worst agrofuel plantation companies. The Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels will provide a way for Europe and North America to claim that their demand for agrofuels is somehow sustainable. It is little more than a green fig leaf allowing business as usual to continue.

Discussions about "sustainable agrofuels" distract us from working towards genuine ways of reducing carbon emissions such as demanding tough legislation on energy efficiency and massive state investment in improved building standards, public transport, high voltage direct current electricity grids and solar and wind power.

Trying to persuading consumers to buy "sustainable agrofuels" may sound like a first small step towards bigger steps, which will eventually lead to real change. But the reality is that certifying agrofuels helps greenwash a hugely destructive industry and impedes the development of urgently needed structural changes.

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