
The EU's dead-end approach to climate-proofing Europe's transport sector: The More Gas You Guzzle the Greener You Are

Biofuels are flavour of the month for car-makers and politicians keen to be seen as green without directly addressing the problem of ever-rising transport emissions. The buzz has also caught on strongly in the EU. On 10 January, the European Commission presented its new energy and biofuels blueprint. It can be summed up in just seven words: bad news for people and the climate.

The Commission's paper proposes that ten per cent of transport fuels (excluding aviation fuel) across the EU should come from biofuels by 2020. These will come from a variety of crops, including rapeseed, maize, sugar beet and grains, palm oil, sugar cane and soya. Some of these biofuel crops will be grown within the EU, but there is limited capacity here – so the larger the European demand for this 'green' fuel, the larger the share grown in the Global South. As the Commission has set a target in proportion to overall transport fuel use, increases in fuel use would increase this volume still further. With transport fuel currently the fastest growing source of emissions increases in the EU, the demand for biofuel imports from the South will be substantial.

This is particularly worrying because there is growing evidence that existing EU demand for biofuels is spurring forest destruction and the conversion of biodiversity-rich ecosystems across the world, from South America to Southeast Asia.

In Cameroon, for example, the largest oil palm plantation SOCAPALM is expanding at the expense of forests traditionally used by local populations. This expansion lies at the root of land conflicts involving Bagyeli, Bulu and Fang populations whose land has been confiscated without compensation. Jobs created at the plantations – which rarely employ local people - are often temporary, without labour contracts, health or accident insurances, and the wages are extremely low: an unskilled worker earns a little more than one euro (about 65p) for a 12 hour work day. Agrochemicals and run-off from the refinery pollute the neighbouring streams, further curtailing local people's livelihood.

In addition to putting local people's livelihoods in jeopardy and causing further deforestation and conversion to intensive agriculture, many a biofuel will also have increased, not reduced greenhouse gas emissions in the process of production and processing. A recent environmental impact study of palm oil grown in South East Asia by the conservation group Wetlands International showed that their use in Europe would generate up to 10 times more CO₂ than the equivalent emissions from burning fossil diesel.

The Commission report mentions such threats only in passing and instead praises biofuels as an opportunity for Southern economies. It fails to acknowledge that the gains from such an export-oriented biofuels market will benefit few in the South, while many will be faced with loss of their traditional lands to monoculture plantations and increasing prices for staple foods. Since biofuel targets in the EU would promote the production of biomass in the global South, the EU could be responsible for reducing the area of land devoted to food production, so eroding local and international food security. Like EU targets, the US biofuel targets have been criticised for requiring

an excessive proportion of the corn crop (20 per cent in 2006). US demand for biofuel from corn has already increased the world grain deficit, raising prices for staple foods such as tortilla in Mexico.

The Commission proposal is also silent on another key issue: the biotech industry's interest in promoting biofuels. The genetically modified varieties of several crops now used as biofuel crops (including maize, soya and oilseed rape) have met strong resistance to their use as food, especially in Europe. The industry hopes that by promoting them as biofuels, these crops will gain acceptance.

Growing transport volumes are the real issue that the EU energy strategy should be tackling. Investment in well-designed and affordable public transport schemes is essential, but the EU blueprint makes no mention of these. The paper leaves no doubt that 'energy security', not climate change or reducing the EU's environmental footprint, is the primary objective of increasing biofuel use in Europe's transport sector. That may explain the lack of attention to measures within the transport sector that could bring about much greater climate change gains. Speed limits and a better power-to-weight ratio for new cars and trucks could result in the same savings; and even greater savings could be achieved by adopting fuel-efficient tyres and reducing fuel consumption through smaller engines in passenger cars. And this all before we get into fuel savings from substituting individualised transport systems through smart public transport schemes. The Commission discards all these options as marginal and not worth pursuing. It prefers risky biofuel imports that are likely to undermine climate and environmental policies over climate-proofing the EU's transport sector. No wonder, then, that over sixty environmental and social justice organisations are already calling for a halt on EU biofuel targets.

By Jutta Kill, FERN, e-mail: jutta@fern.org, www.fern.org, www.sinkswatch.org This article will appear in the Issue 150 of Red Pepper, March 2007, "Temperature Gauge", <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/>

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