

ARTICLE TO BE CONSIDERED FOR BoS - "BIOFUELS DEBATE – BLESSING OR BANE?"

What are biofuels? This is what we can get from plants such as palm oil, corn, soya, rapeseed, and sugar cane, which produces fuels when refined. (Biodiesel and bioethanol). Burning them produces CO₂ but not as much as petrol and they are less polluting.

Sounds like the answer to our fuel problems!

However – the use of land to produce biofuels reduces land for food production. Action Aid reports 260 million people driven into hunger by the growth in biofuels and has urged the G8 countries to act now to avoid a crisis. Oxfam director, Phil Bloomer, also believes that the increase in food prices (140% from January 2002 to February 2008) was caused by several factors, but the large increase in biofuels production in the US and EU had the greatest effect. Oxfam welcomed the MEP vote in the European parliament recently to reduce the target for biofuels in transport fuel from 10% to 4%.

Columbia is pursuing vast biofuel plantations and this is causing huge environmental damage as well as worker exploitation. The African oil palm industry is booming but employees here are suffering too. The US wants Latin America to be the "green fuel" centre of the world but the maize-producing Mid West shows more fossil fuel consumed than saved in production! Net energy return does occur in tropics where sugar cane, oil palm, soya or castor are grown, but "monoculture" is the danger here.

The UK Government's Environmental Audit Committee published a report entitled "Are Biofuels Sustainable? The Government Response". In this it was clearly stated that biofuels are damaging unless high standards for sustainability and safeguards are ensured. Serious management issues MUST be enforced world-wide if we are not to destroy the planet in order to keep it moving. The Committee asks government to resist EU biofuel targets.

However, there is a brighter side! Biofuels from non-food materials and all kinds of waste could be encouraged. And there are plants such as jatropha and pongamia for diesel engines to run on, which can be grown in semi-arid areas in India. It is claimed these can enrich communities and landscape. These trees grow on barren scrubland unsuited to food crops and there is no danger of deforestation. The trees give shade, retain carbon and provide organic matter for the ground, conserving moisture and regenerating topsoil. A "green gold for India"?

Newest methods use whole plant, so a crop can supply food and fuel. Also, waste gases rich in hydrogen can be another fuel source.

Transport Secretary, Ruth Kelly, and Environment Secretary, Hilary Benn, have set out a new approach to biofuels based on recommendations from the Gallagher review, asking that the introduction of biofuels in the UK should be slowed down to take into account emerging scientific evidence about the sustainability. (DfT Press release 7 July).

There is a recognition that biofuels have a legitimate and positive role to play in tackling climate change but there is a need to monitor sustainability and their wider impacts. The UK government will “proceed cautiously” so that the level of biofuels will increase to 5% by 2013/14 rather than 2010/11.

There are always 2 sides to any argument, so we need to be aware of both positive and negative implications regarding biofuels, which need to be being grasped by politicians as well as environmentally informed professionals.

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