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Are cars powered by electricity and hydrogen really better for the planet than biofuels?

Posted by [James Kanter](#) in [General](#)



Some experts say electric cars can be just as bad for the environment as traditional gas guzzlers. (Alessia Pierdomenico/Reuters)

Many scientists and environmentalists agree that the benefits to the environment from the first generation of biofuels were grossly exaggerated. Many also say that Europe's ambitious goal of replacing 10 percent of gasoline and diesel with biofuels is misguided.

A key problem is that fuels from crops cut into food supplies and help raise the costs of some staples like wheat and corn – hitting the poorest people in the world hardest. Another problem is that growing and processing some biofuels may result in just as much planet-warming gas as burning fossil fuels.

Legislators in Europe started backpedaling on biofuels in July, when the Environment Committee of the European Parliament called for a much lower target — 4 percent rather than 10 percent — and said the measures should be reviewed in 2015 before any decision to ratchet further upward. The legislators stressed the importance of using transport fuels that come from feed stocks that do not compete with food for cropland. They also suggested that Europe could meet clean fuel targets by expanding the use of vehicles powered by biogas, electricity and hydrogen.

On Thursday, the Industry Committee of the European Parliament is also expected to call for a revision of the 10 percent target before the full Parliament and EU governments reach a final decision, which is expected before the end of this year.

But biofuels manufacturers are still fighting for the future of their industry in Europe.

According to Bernard Nicol, the president of the European Biodiesel Board, while alternatives to biofuels like hydrogen and electricity might help reduce tailpipe pollution, they actually result in burning more fossil fuels in their manufacture.

Nicol said last week that "dictating that up to half of the targets be met by electricity and hydrogen would mean transforming 40-50 percent of the transport obligation back into fossil energy on the pretext of addressing concerns about biofuels sustainability."

And according to major palm oil producers like Malaysia, the EU should keep its targets because growers there are willing and able to meet tough environmental criteria. "As long as the standards developed by the EU are based on sound science and are nondiscriminatory, I can assure you that Malaysian producers will meet them," Peter Chin, the Malaysian minister for plantation industries and commodities, said Wednesday.

What should Europe do?