

Biofuels cannot come from ripped-up rainforest, says Brussels

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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - A long-awaited European Commission communication outlining guidelines on what constitutes genuinely sustainable biofuels has already run into strong criticism.

Environmentalists and development groups say the rules overlook the key aspect of the controversial energy source that turns what was once thought of as a green alternative into a net producer of greenhouse gas emissions.

On Thursday (10 June), the commission is to unveil guidelines aiming to clarify rules contained in a 2008 law on biofuels, aiming to counter a massive backlash against the fuels.

Two years ago, a cavalcade of expert reports revealed that many forms of the fuel source both increase greenhouse gas emissions and put pressure on food prices.

The new guidelines however now underscore that ripping up rainforests or draining bogs to grow the plants that produce the fuel defeat the purpose of a green energy source, as the emissions released when forests or peatlands are transformed can actually put more CO₂ into the atmosphere.

Campaigners are pleased that the most egregious biofuels will be unable to receive a new EU 'quality mark' or quality certification process stamp endorsing their green credentials.

Earlier drafts of the guidelines, reported on in February by EUobserver, had shocked green groups, as they appeared to redefine palm plantations - the source of one of the most destructive forms of biofuels - as 'forests'.

The draft guidelines had argued that because palm oil plantations are tall enough and shady enough, they count as forests: "This means, for example, that a change from forest to oil palm plantation would not per se constitute a breach of the [sustainability criteria]."

This now has been stripped out, a move likely to anger Malaysia and Indonesia, who are major producers of palm-oil biofuels and have spent substantial lobbying time and capital trying to convince Brussels not to do so.

The Malaysian Palm Oil Council for the last two years has employed GPlus, the international lobbying outfit, to press their case in both Brussels and national capitals, and brought a number of ministers to Europe to meet with their counterparts on a couple of occasions, according to the firm.

Energy commissioner Guenther Oettinger will be calling on fuel firms to apply for the quality mark, which will read "Recognised by the European Union," by the end of the year. The stamp would last for five years.

However, campaigners worry about the trustworthiness of the certification, as the audits of a firm's biofuels will be paid for by the companies themselves. As has happened with other quality marks such as those aiming to assure international standards for working conditions, companies are more likely to hire auditors that will give them an easy ride than ones that give them a grilling.

But crucially, the guidelines do not take into account the additional greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the displacement of food crops to other lands to make way for biofuels.

The land used to grow crops or let animals graze moves elsewhere, still resulting in the destruction of forests, bogs and grasslands and producing some of the biggest emissions.

This process, known amongst climate specialists as 'indirect land-use change' (ILUC), will however be studied by the commission.

"We are fully aware of the ILUC issue and are attempting to quantify it," a commission expert told reporters on Wednesday, "and we will come up with further legislative proposal by end of year if necessary."

The Greens in the European Parliament were quick to issue concern about "major loopholes [that] mean the proposals would lead to anything but sustainable biofuels."

"Any direct environmental benefits of biofuels could be completely undone by indirect land-use change," the group said in a blog posting on the new guidelines. "If the commission does not incorporate this into the criteria for calculating lifecycle emissions of biofuels, the real world implications of EU biofuel targets are at best climate neutral and more likely driving global climate change."

"The communication looks set to be little more than coarse greenwash."

Development NGOs also were frustrated that there was no mention of the pressure biofuels places on food prices. As agricultural land is squeezed, the cost of food increases, placing an extra burden on impoverished communities in the developing world.

Biofuels development has also produced a massive rush for land in the global south, they complain.

"The guidelines don't contain any social criteria, only environmental concerns. Biofuels expansion often leads to communities losing their land as agricultural production is displaced by fuel production," Anders Dahlbeck, ActionAid's EU campaigns co-ordinator, told EUobserver.

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