

Biofuels industry does not deserve to be demonised

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Given all the hysteria over biofuels you'd be forgiven for believing that wiping out the biofuels industry will solve world hunger. It won't. Firstly, agriculture is not a zero-sum game. As well as offering genuine greenhouse gas savings today and even better prospects in future, biofuels have already led to big investments in sustainable farming practices which can improve agricultural productivity in the round.

Here in the UK, our home-produced biofuels provide as much high-protein animal feed as low-carbon liquid fuel – essential for our hard-pressed livestock industry. This feed in turn displaces imported soy, which is often associated with high carbon emissions.

Many NGOs also neglect to remind us that one-third of world food is wasted – a staggering figure which casts a very different light on how best to use land and tackle hunger. And extreme weather events consistent with climate change itself are destroying crops – yet transport is a major contributor to carbon emissions.

Of course, if the biofuels industry were to endlessly expand there would be inevitable conflict between food and fuel. But what is vital to understand, and what is missing from the debate, is that biofuels are at an early stage in their technological learning curve. With the right framework, this technology will have moved on long before conflict need be inevitable, and agriculture will have become more sustainable and productive in the meantime.

The European commission's new proposals, announced last month, aim to dramatically reorientate support towards advanced biofuels. We've been asking for a clear 2020 pathway to reward exactly that. But having been ignored, the measures now put forward are so drastic and fast, they present the UK industry with a canyon it simply cannot leap.

Why would investors who stand to lose hundreds of millions of pounds put their hands in their pockets for several hundred million more? The commission proposals – to allow crop-based biofuels to reduce our fossil fuel use by only 5%, and to withdraw the market for these biofuels altogether after 2020 - mean that around £700m of investment in the UK biofuels industry could be in peril.

You'd think we can go on using oil forever. We can't. And neither can we decarbonise transport at the pace we need to with electric vehicles (EVs).

In fact, EVs are not environmentally perfect – a recent report in the Journal of Industrial Ecology shows EVs can contribute more to climate change than cars running on oil and they can create more toxic waste. Does that mean we trash EVs? Of course not. It means we work hard on the technology and green our electricity supply to improve their performance. However, as the Committee on Climate Change acknowledges, biofuels will be necessary over the next 20 years at least to decarbonise our transport sector.

Domestic UK biofuels already deliver greenhouse gas savings of up to 77% versus fossil fuels. Despite our domestic industry's small size (it makes up only 20% of the overall UK biofuels market, which also includes imports), it is also delivering technological innovation, in particular with plans to develop more biofuels from waste.

However, rather than recognising our responsible achievements in difficult circumstances, commentators often demonise biofuels indiscriminately. The work of NGOs in exposing appalling biofuels practices overseas is indeed valuable. The UK biofuels industry also condemns these practices, over which we have no control. But there are, and will always be, bad businesses in every sector – banking, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, food – you name it.

But what is particularly galling for the biofuels industry is that we have been attacked with considerably more venom than other non-food uses of land, such as cosmetics, cotton for our disposable clothing culture, or detergents. None of these industries are being made to account for land-use changes. Equally galling was finding ourselves alone this time last year in calling for the UK to legislate against the import of unsustainable biofuels of unknown origin into our domestic market. Government had the powers to do so and it certainly took its time.

Today, 50% of Brazil's transport system is running on biofuels produced from around 1% of its land with greenhouse gas savings of up to 90%. It's a stunning result. Is Brazil really the only country whose technicians can pull off successful biofuel technology? If the EU proposals go through, we may never find out, as any hope of further investment in the UK industry will be destroyed.

Grossly simplifying the issues and creating bogeymen may play well with the media but it risks crushing desperately needed solutions.

It is so easy to demonise and destroy. It is considerably harder to apply careful considered thought and to secure an intelligent pathway through these complex issues. And it may also be hard to really listen to the industry's achievements given the scent of blood.

But that is what we need, and we need the NGOs and politicians who recognise that to step forward and work with the UK industry, which is among the best in the world. The fate of this industry, and the climate, is all down to whether we can really develop the much more grown-upenergy discourse we need in the UK, or whether we will remain stuck in this comic-book level of analysis and debate.