

Commission to fudge CO2 effects of biofuel

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Oettinger and Hedegaard reject advice from Commission's scientific experts.

The European Commission has rejected the advice of its scientific experts and backed away from imposing tough carbon-dioxide emissions standards on specific types of biofuel.

[Günther Oettinger](#), the European commissioner for [energy](#), and [Connie Hedegaard](#), the European commissioner for climate action, are poised to propose instead a cruder environmental standard, that all biofuel sold in the [European Union](#) will have to produce carbon-dioxide savings of 50% compared with fossil fuel. The current standard, contained in the EU's renewable-energy law, is a saving of at least 35%.

Environmentalists have been urging the Commission to introduce more sophisticated measurements of the greenhouse-gas savings from biofuel. They argue that the EU has to take into account the effects of indirect land-use change (ILUC) – such as biofuel crops displacing food crops onto previously uncultivated land that might, for instance, host environmentally valuable woodland.

Different types of biofuel have different ILUC effects, which means that their environmental performance varies, sometimes widely.

Reports by the [International Food Policy Research Institute](#) and the [EU's Joint Research Centre](#) have found that oilseeds, including rapeseed, soya and [palm oil](#), have high ILUC effects, reducing the net benefits for the climate of using these crops for energy.

Only this week, a scientific committee of the [European Environment Agency](#), an EU body charged with providing advice to the EU institutions, warned that to assume that using biomass as an energy source was carbon neutral was “a serious accounting error”. Using land for biomass meant that the land was not available to store carbon. “Legislation that encourages substitution of fossil fuels by bioenergy, irrespective of the biomass source, may even result in increased carbon emissions”, the committee warned.

Faced with escalating doubts about the environmental benefits of biofuel, the Commission agreed in 2008 to examine the ILUC effects and to produce a report in 2010 on what action might be needed. The promised impact assessment – much delayed – is expected next month.

But the commissioners have now agreed to postpone action until 2014, the last year of the mandate of the current Commission. Only then will they make their proposals to attach specific CO2 values to each type of biofuel – deferring any impact from new measures until 2016 at the earliest.

The crop-specific proposals are being delayed even though a note of the commissioners' discussion of the issue in July said: “The introduction of feedstock-specific factors would seem to be the most effective solution to address ILUC.”

The decision to delay is being blamed on “scientific uncertainties” about the appropriate level of ILUC values.

Bas Eickhout, a Dutch Green MEP who drafted a recent European Parliament report on the EU's greenhouse-gas reduction targets, called the delay a “really wrong decision”. The right policies were needed to provide incentives for feedstocks with a low ILUC effect: raising the threshold for greenhouse-gas reductions would not “provide incentives for good biofuels and would not punish bad biofuels”, since it failed to differentiate between crops.

He predicted that the Commission would struggle to muster support in the Parliament for its proposal to increase the CO2 savings requirement from the current 35%. The commissioners are understood to favour a level of about 50%, which is in any case what the existing law requires from 2017.

Hedegaard told European Voice: “Commissioner Oettinger and I, both responsible for ILUC, have agreed that within this mandate we will now propose ILUC factors. We are now looking into how we can strengthen our regulation and will have an impact assessment ready this autumn.”

Raffaello Garofolo, the secretary-general of the European Biodiesel Board, said that an increase in the standard for carbon savings from biofuel “would put the whole production chain under stress.” Legislation based on uncertain scientific evidence could “kill the

European biodiesel industry", to the benefit of biodiesel produced outside the EU from palm oil, he warned.