

Europe to reaffirm biofuels targets

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The European parliament will tomorrow reaffirm binding targets for biofuels in transport and for renewables in energy use in the face of growing political resistance.

MEPs on the parliament's key industry committee will set a mandatory target of 5% of biofuels in transport by 2015, rising to 10% by 2020.

They will also defy objections from several governments, including Britain, and approve in principle a system of penalties for countries which fail to meet interim targets for renewable energy.

Claude Turmes, Green MEP and rapporteur on the renewables directive, said after exhaustive talks with political groups to consider up to 2000 amendments said he was now optimistic the new law could be approved before the end of the year. He said he had won support across the political spectrum for his compromises.

Biofuels have increasingly come under attack for allegedly causing land used for food and animal feed to be switched to fuel crops and for being a prime cause of soaring food and commodity prices.

A protagonist of scrapping the controversial biofuels target, Turmes said the agreed compromise would see second-generation biofuels - from non-food, non-feed crops - gradually play a greater role.

In the interim stage, he said, second-generation biofuels would provide 1% of the overall 5% target and, in the second stage, 4% of the 10% target. The original scheme was for biofuels to provide 5.75% of transport fuel by 2010.

Electric and hydrogen-fuelled cars would play a substantial role in meeting these targets despite scepticism that manufacturers can either produce enough or sell them. But they would only count if the electricity or hydrogen came from verifiably "green" sources.

Other biofuels will only be counted towards the overall targets if they meet tougher sustainability criteria than proposed by the European commission or many governments. Turmes said the agreed compromise would mean that fuels saving 45% of carbon emissions would count - rather than the 35% proposed earlier. In time this could rise to 60%.

The targets and standards will provoke a row with European biofuel producers who claim they are being forced out of their home markets by subsidised imports. The European Biodiesel Board (EBB) said biofuel production was not the cause of commodity price rises and the fuels involved met higher sustainability criteria than allowed by the EC.

Much of European biofuels come from rapeseed oil which, the EC says, saves 36% of carbon emissions - just meeting the standard. But the EBB's secretary-general, Raffaello Garofalo, said the savings were much higher.

Tomorrow's vote at the European parliament, meanwhile, is also expected to provoke disputes with governments as MEPs should approve plans to give priority access to power grids for electricity produced from renewables, potentially shutting down coal-fired and nuclear plants. Britain is a leading opponent of the scheme, arguing that it interferes with market forces.