

Comment: Scientists push biofuels controversy further into uncharted waters

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The latest development in the increasingly fraught biofuels debate takes EU policymaking into an unusual area. More than 150 scientists from Europe and beyond have written to the European Commission today, demanding that their work be taken seriously.

"All the studies of land use change indicate that the emissions related to biofuels expansion are significant and can be quite large," states the letter, signed by the scientists and delivered by US environment watchdog the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Scientific research plays a large role in the development of EU law, but the contribution is more usually in the form of expert reports, presented as studies to accompany legislative proposals. A large number of scientists to proactively publish their concerns suggests a shift in attitudes.

Scientific hackles have been raised recently by the commission's rejection of the science underlying a recent biofuels report from the European Environment Agency, as well as by perceived delays to the publication of research entitled 'Assessing the land use change consequences of European biofuel policies and its uncertainties' (see here).

The commission is in the process of assessing the best way to tackle the negative impacts of switching land use to biofuel crops, which it is feared can have an effect on food prices as well as on greenhouse-gas emission levels.

The scientists write that "there are uncertainties inherent in estimating the magnitude of indirect land use emissions from biofuels, but a policy that implicitly or explicitly assigns a value of zero is clearly not supported by the science."

They add that "the current scientific understanding is sufficient to warrant immediate action, as has already been recognised in the US Federal Renewable Fuel Standard and California Low Carbon Fuels Standard."

The commission is thought to agree that the Californian standards are a possible model for biofuels land-use standards, but only once these have been updated over the next three years (see here).

"Our comments are relevant to your deliberations on indirect land use change (ILUC) emissions in the context of the Renewable Energy and Fuel Quality Directives," concludes the letter.

But the science may not be so clear-cut. Commission officials point out that there have been numerous studies on ILUC from different researchers and institutes, and is reserving judgement on which findings to favour.

A commission energy department representative said the commission agrees that ILUC linked to biofuels is a problem and can reduce greenhouse-gas emissions savings. The commission is drafting its own impact assessment, and will make recommendations based on this.

But yet another twist will come later today from industry representatives the European Biodiesel Board (EBB). Its study will question the data it fears the commission will use for its impact assessment. This new study will "highlight alarming loopholes in the [commission] methodology," according to an EBB statement, and will raise questions about "the relevance of using economic modelling as a basis for political decision."

"If not corrected, this situation could be detrimental to biofuel producers who are already submitted to drastic sustainability criteria," the EBB says. "Fossil fuels and renewable fuels would therefore not be treated on an equal footing."

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