



Studies cast further doubt on sustainability of bioenergy

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Brussels, 29 June 2010 – Two new independent scientific studies launched today cast further doubt on the EU's policy of promoting biomass as fuel for heat and power generation, and biofuels for transport [1], according to BirdLife International [2], the European Environmental Bureau [3] and Transport & Environment [4].

The first study, carried out by Joanneum Research, identifies a major flaw in the way carbon savings from forest-derived biomass are calculated in EU law as well as under UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol mechanisms.

It concludes that harvesting trees for energy creates a 'carbon debt': the carbon contained in the trees is emitted upfront while trees grow back over many years. The true climate impact of so-called woody biomass in the short to medium term can, as a result, be worse than the fossil fuels it is designed to replace. [5]

"The EU is taking out a sub-prime carbon mortgage that it may never be able to pay back. Biomass policy needs to be fixed before this regulatory failure leads to an ecological crisis that no bail out will ever fix", commented Ariel Brunner, Head of EU Policy at BirdLife International.

The second study, by CE Delft, examined the full climate impact of the main biofuels used in Europe. In particular it looked at the impact of the expansion of agricultural land into environmentally sensitive areas when food production is displaced by fuel crops, a process known as indirect land use change (ILUC). The report, based on analysis of several EU Commission-sponsored research projects and other international model studies, found that most current biofuels are as bad as fossil fuels for the climate once ILUC is taken into consideration. The study proposes concrete ways of correcting current greenhouse gas balance calculations to fully account for indirect land use change related emissions. [6]

"As long as the EU refuses to take the full climate impacts of biofuels into account, its climate strategy for transport is doomed to failure." said Nuša Urbancic, Policy Officer at Transport & Environment, the sustainable transport campaigners.

Together, current EU policy on biomass and biofuels risks severe environmental impacts across the globe, and a carbon debt that could take centuries to pay off.

“If left unchanged, biomass for energy policy will soon be in the same dire and confused state as biofuel policy is today”, added Pieter de Pous, Senior Policy Officer at the European Environmental Bureau. “This can be avoided if the Commission and industry are ready to face up to these facts and develop the necessary measures that will ensure bioenergy policy will actually make a positive contribution to fighting climate change”. [7]

The three groups are calling on the EU to come forward with mandatory sustainability criteria for biomass and to incorporate indirect land use change calculations into the existing sustainability criteria for biofuels and to incorporate indirect land-use change and carbon-debt calculations into sustainability criteria for biofuels and bioenergy.

The report “Bioenergy: a carbon accounting time bomb”, based on the two studies by Joanneum Research and CE Delft, will be presented on 29 June 2010, from 2 to 4.30 pm, in the European Parliament, Paul-Henri Spaak P7C050.

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Notes to editors

[1] The European Union (EU) established a 20% target for renewable energy use by 2020 and a 10% target for renewables in the transport sector by 2020. Bioenergy, including solid biomass and waste, is expected to represent 60% of the EU’s renewable energy use and biofuels are expected to cover most of the 10% renewable energy use in transport. Biofuels are subject to sustainability criteria which require a minimum greenhouse gas saving of 35%. Indirect Land Use Change emissions are not currently taken into consideration but the Directive requires the Commission to come out with a Communication on how to address the problem by the end of 2010.

Sustainability criteria for solid biomass have been required by the European Parliament but have finally not have been included in the Directive. The Commission has been mandated also in this case to look into the issue but has recently announced that it does not intend proposing such standards.

[2] BirdLife International is a global Partnership of nature conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries and territories. BirdLife is the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the problems affecting them, and is working on a wide range of environmental issues. BirdLife has 42 Partners in Europe, and is represented in all 27 Member States.

For more information about the work of the BirdLife European Division:

<http://europe.birdlife.org>

[3] The EEB is a federation of more than 140 environmental citizens' organisations based in all EU Member States and most Accession Countries, as well as in a few neighbouring countries. These organisations range from local and national, to European and international. The aim of the EEB is to protect and improve the environment of Europe and to enable the citizens of Europe to play their part in achieving that goal.

www.eeb.org/

[4] T&E is an independent pan-European association with scientific and educational aims, with no party political affiliation and devoid of any profit making motive. T&E's mission is to promote a policy of transport and accessibility, based on the principles of sustainable development, which minimises negative impacts on the environment and health, use of energy and land and all economic and social costs, maximises safety, and guarantees sufficient access for all. Established in 1990, T&E represents around 50 organisations across Europe, mostly environmental groups and sustainable transport campaigners.

www.transportenvironment.org

[5] Carbon debt. The carbon debt created when woody biomass is burned can take centuries to pay off. The result is that biomass can be more harmful to the climate than the fossil fuel it replaces. This study suggests that while recovering waste biomass can have short term emission reduction benefits, increasing the harvesting of standing forests will mostly lead to worsening of the climate crisis, and that is before even starting to look at other impacts such as biodiversity loss or increased erosion.

[6] Carbon laundering. Growing biofuels on agricultural land results in the conversion of forests and other natural areas into cropland to replace those agricultural lands lost to biofuels production. This results in related emissions that

can completely negate any climate benefits. The scientific evidence is growing that most current biofuels have very poor greenhouse gas performance and the majority are actually worse for the climate than the fossil fuels they replace.

[7] Download the report at

http://www.birdlife.org/eu/pdfs/carbon_bomb_21_06_2010.pdf