EU scientists confirms bio-energy accounting error

Title
A major carbon accounting flaw in EU legislation whereby biofuels used in transport and biomass used for power generation are counted as ?zero emissions? will have ?immense? consequences for the environment.

This is the key finding of a report published on Friday 16 October by the Scientific Committee of the European Environment Agency (EEA), a top EU advisory body.

Click here to read the EEA report.

The report warns that counting biofuels and biomass as ?zero emissions? is wrong because it ignores the emissions that come when the fuels are burned, assuming that this impact is automatically offset when new plants grow. In many cases these emissions will not be offset because increased demand for land for bioenergy will just displace emissions elsewhere.

The report goes on to say that ?if bioenergy could or should provide 20% to 50% of the world?s energy needs in coming decade?doing so would require doubling or tripling the total amount of plant material currently harvested from the planet?s land.? Such an increase would have devastating environmental consequences.

The report follows the similar findings of a study published in June last year by three environmental organisations, BirdLife Europe, EEB, and T&E. (x) The organisations have repeatedly called for an end to so-called 'zero counting' of bioenergy emissions, including those from biofuels production.

The EU is currently reviewing one of the accounting flaws linked to its mandatory renewable energy target for transport, which will mostly come from a switch to biofuels. Currently so-called EU ?sustainability criteria? fails to account for the central question of indirect impacts on land use and emissions (Indirect land use change or ILUC). ILUC occurs when biofuel crops replace food crops.

The land needed to grow the missing food is displaced, often to the developing world. This in turn causes rainforests and other sensitive eco-systems to be destroyed to grow food, causing a massive release of emissions. Many EU countries are scaling up on biomass for heat and power, and biofuels for transport to meet mandatory European renewable targets. The report shows that continuing with today?s flawed carbon accounting would lead to an increase rather than a decrease of emissions in the real world.

Biomass and biofuels receive generous subsidies and tax breaks across Europe, leaving the EU faced with the prospect of an ?environmental? measure causing disastrous consequences, and largely funded by the taxpayer. Ariel Brunner, Head of EU policy of BirdLife Europe said: ?The EU has been basing its entire bioenergy policy on fake carbon accounting; the result is a sub-prime bioenergy mortgage that will never be paid off unless the EU changes course immediately.?

Faustine Defossez of the European Environmental Bureau said: ?This study should be taken as a wake up call to start bringing out some badly needed policy adjustments: it is now clear that the increase in harvesting of plant material for energy purposes, foreseen under the Renewable Directive, will have serious negative environmental, including climate impacts? Nusa Urbancic of Transport & Environment said: ?The European Commission has been sitting on its hands for almost three years figuring out what to do about the indirect effects of biofuels. Every serious scientific body that has studied the issue says action is needed, the EEA is the latest in a long line. The EU should waste no more time coming forward with a proposal to fix this massive accounting hole. It?s important not just for the environment but also for the biofuels industry in Europe, which has frozen most of its investments, until it knows what the future rules are going to be.?

NOTES [x] Two studies commissioned by BirdLife Europe, EEB, and T&E show that Europe has a major carbon accounting problem, threatening the credibility of two flagship EU environmental policies: the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) and the Emissions Trading Scheme. Under EU accounting rules, burning bioenergy is

considered to be ?carbon neutral? despite the release of significant greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the short-medium term, turning bioenergy into a misguided policy tool for achieving emissions reductions. The best available scientific evidence shows that the carbon costs of many bioenergy options are high.

Bioenergy causes losses of carbon to the atmosphere from vegetation and soils when biomass is harvested. And biofuels cause losses of carbon to the atmosphere when land is converted - either directly or indirectly - to meet the increased demand for agricultural crops. See the full report here.