

This is not clean energy: The true cost of our biofuels



Amazon razed for soya



Oil palm nursery against burning rainforest on Borneo

Governments and corporations are subsidising and promoting biofuels as 'green energy'. They want us to think it is part of the solution to climate change. At the moment, a mere 1% of the world's transport fuels come from biofuels, but already millions of hectares of rainforest and other ecosystems rich in biodiversity are being destroyed. Farmland on which rural communities depend for their food is being transformed into monoculture plantations. The EU, democrats and republicans in the US, many governments, including those of Brazil, Indonesia, China, Malaysia and many of the UN organisations want to convert hundreds of millions of hectares into vast plantations to grow crops for our cars.

However, both the recent US biofuels policy and the EU biofuels directive for 4-10 fold increases in biofuel production by 2020 are driven by other factors. Such grandiose schemes suit politicians because they can continue with "business-as-usual" policies and year-on-year economic growth, and not take the more difficult steps of actually reducing energy demand and reconfiguring the human activity around more sustainable transport. Biofuels also provide a short-term "energy security" fix so that there is less pressure on finding Oil reserves in hostile areas. Biofuels expansion is also creating a huge new global industry for the agriculture, biotech, and chemical sectors as well as the refining and shipping sectors. Any perceived benefits to climate change are subsidiary to these geo-political and business concerns.

What are biofuels doing to the climate?

Almost one third of all greenhouse gas emissions come from the destruction of rainforests, peatlands, other ecosystems, and from agriculture. Intensive agriculture relies on large amounts of nitrate fertilisers. These fertilisers are the main source of one of the most powerful greenhouse gases – nitrous oxide (about 300 times more powerful than carbon dioxide).

More rainforest and peatland destruction and intensive agriculture is the quickest way to make climate change worse – even if biofuels cut down a bit on fossil fuel use. Ironically switching to biofuels doesn't really reduce our emissions much, because large amounts of fossil fuels go into making the fertilisers, running agricultural machinery, transporting feedstocks and fuels, and refining biofuels – these factors are omitted in most "studies" that suggest climate benefits from biofuels.

Experienced rainforest campaigners are warning that, within the next few years, biofuels could become the main reason for rainforest destruction worldwide.

Cutting down rainforests doesn't just add carbon to the atmosphere in the same way burning coal or oil does: Many rainforests and other ecosystems have a 'tipping point'. This means we can degrade them so far and then they could collapse suddenly and completely – including the Amazon, which could be pushed into a cycle of mega-fires and desertification. Peat drainage in South-east Asia has turned one of the biggest carbon sinks on earth into one of the greatest sources of emissions. Indonesia is already the world's third biggest emitter of carbon dioxide. Nearly all their emissions come from peat drainage, deforestation and fires. Indonesia is now draining the remaining peat, destroying much of what remains of its rainforests. It is turning them into vast oil palm plantations for biodiesel – all in the name of 'green energy'!

Biofuel refugees?

The reporter to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has warned that 60 million indigenous people worldwide are threatened with losing their land and livelihoods if biofuel expansion continues as planned. 5 million indigenous people in one province on Borneo are at risk of becoming 'biofuel refugees'.

Burning food in cars

"The grain required to fill a 25-gallon SUV gas tank with ethanol will feed one person for a year." (Lester Brown, Director of the Earth Policy Institute).

Diverting huge quantities of food to cars is a sure way of making people go hungry. Already, thanks to George Bush's enthusiasm about ethanol, corn prices in Mexico have gone up by about 70% in six months.

This price rise has sparked mass protests because people can no longer afford their staple food. World grain reserves are steadily being depleted, pushing up food prices across the globe. This is a growing disaster for poor people in poor countries. Meanwhile the rich can salve their conscience by driving their children to school with 'green' fuel in the tank. And car manufacturers have no need to make their gas-guzzlers more efficient. People who use biofuel have said it allows them to drive more.

What do people in the global South say about this?

Hundreds of NGOs in Latin America, Asia and Africa have spoken out against large-scale biofuel monocultures.

"We want food sovereignty, not biofuels...While Europeans maintain their lifestyle based on automobile culture, the population of Southern countries will have less and less land for food crops and will lose its food sovereignty...We are therefore appealing to the governments and people of the European Union countries to seek solutions that do not worsen the already dramatic social and environmental situation of the peoples of Latin America, Asia and Africa. "

(from a declaration by Latin American NGOs)

"Palm oil for biofuels increases social conflicts and undermines land reform in Indonesia...It is unavoidable that, as a consequence of Europe's biofuels policy, the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities will be relinquished further, and that food security will be undermined and lands for agricultural purposes and subsistence livelihoods will diminish."

(Sawit Watch, Indonesian NGO)

"It is a push by industry to make another scramble for Africa, grab the land and continue with business as usual. The industrial bio-energy push to do increased bio-energy demand will be nothing other than an effort at extending the frontiers of neo-colonialism in its continued march on the back of the fabled market forces"

(Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria)

Can't we support 'sustainable biofuels', though?

We can get a very small amount of energy from waste-vegetable oil, biogas from landfill or manure – and that's something to be supported. But it's not enough to reduce our carbon emissions by much. Let's call that waste-fuels, as opposed to 'agro-fuels'. Many communities in low-energy societies would like to grow biomass sustainably in their local area and for their own use. This is a good idea – but unfortunately, local, sustainable forms of biofuels are the very opposite of the large-scale agrofuel expansion being pursued by governments, companies and international institutions.

Many companies, governments and some Western NGOs want to certify 'sustainable' soya and palm oil that is not linked to deforestation. Many communities and NGOs in the South deeply resent this, because vast monocultures for export are anything but sustainable!

And there is another problem: Deforestation rates go up when the price for soya, sugar cane and palm oil goes up – no matter where Britain gets its biofuels. Even if we were to only burn more rapeseed oil, wheat or corn, we'd still be driving up food prices across the board, and helping to trash rainforests.

Farmers movements in Paraguay have called for a global moratorium on monoculture agrofuels and on the trade in agro-fuels, including the trade in carbon credits. Many organisations in Europe and elsewhere are drawing up proposals for a new campaign for such a moratorium.

What you can do

- Show solidarity with communities in the global South who are resisting the expansion of monocultures for agrofuels.
- Sign up to the Biofuelwatch Yahoo Group – either to regular news, or to email campaign alerts only. To subscribe send a blank email to biofuelwatch-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.
- Take part in Biofuelwatch email campaigns by going to www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/alerts.php.
- Email us at info@biofuelwatch.org.uk if you would like to get more involved in the campaign.