

EU biofuels reform meaningless without decarbonisation target

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Opinion

The new parliament must ensure that biofuels and fossil-based sources are subject to proper carbon accounting if Europe's transport is to be cleaned up, writes Pietro Caloprisco.



The EU took some small but welcome steps towards reforming its biofuels policy on 13 June when the council of energy ministers agreed a position. Clearly the content of this agreement - food-based biofuels capped at seven per cent of petrol and diesel sold, and weak national targets for advanced biofuels - is far from satisfactory as it still fails to differentiate among the various types of biofuels and reward those with better environmental performance.

By voting to cap food-based biofuels, council and parliament agreed - with differences in the level of the cap - on the great importance in limiting further penetration of harmful biofuels, which cause indirect land-use change (ILUC). This phenomenon occurs when land previously used to grow crops for food is converted to grow crops for fuel, causing deforestation and the opening of carbon sinks as new land is converted for production.

This is crucial because, without reform, food-based biofuels will constitute 8.6 per cent of transport fuels by 2020. Allowing this to happen will mean that harmful biofuels will further penetrate the fuels market and generate emissions equivalent to adding up to 29 million cars to the EU's roads by the end of the decade. The need to properly account for the carbon these fuels produce is obvious.

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However, all the agreements stop here. As the legislation goes to parliament for a second reading, the difference between council and parliament's positions has become more evident: the EU's post-2020 transport fuel policy. While the parliament voted for the continuation of the fuel quality directive post-2020 and accounting for emissions caused by ILUC, the council had no willingness to continue decarbonising fuel for transport.

But why does a post-2020 decarbonisation target for transport fuels matter in the ILUC reform? Transport is set to become the highest emitting sector, responsible for 31 per cent of the EU's CO2 emissions by 2030, bypassing the power sector. Yet in its 2030 climate and energy plan, the commission announced its intention to abandon the decarbonisation target for transport fuels through the fuel quality directive. By doing so, the commission is stating that a transport-dedicated approach to push for decarbonisation post-2020 is not needed.

Discontinuing the decarbonisation target of the fuel quality directive would also render the ILUC reform that was supposed to deliver its effects post-2020 meaningless. This post-2020 aspect was part of the commission's original proposal for the ILUC reform and is the position of the parliament.

The lack of EU regulation for transport fuels would most likely result in a slower decarbonisation path. Furthermore, leaving to member states the burden of regulating the sector would lead to a patchwork that is just not compatible with the sector - ask any car manufacturer. A harmonised EU approach to decarbonisation is the way forward.

As the reform of the biofuel policies advances in trilogues, parliament must remain firm in its commitment to make the oil industry (and its products) share the burden of cleaning up transport. The new parliament should finish the job started by their predecessors: ensure the proper carbon accounting for biofuels and fossil fuels alike in post-2020 decarbonisation target for transport fuels.

About the author

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