

## Biorefineries present 'historic opportunity' to regenerate rural Europe

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News

The development of local biorefineries can 'completely reverse' the decline in rural EU communities, writes Rob Vierhout.



The rolling plains of Hungary. The lakes of Finland. The pastures of the Irish mid-west. For many of us, these places evoke memories of fleeting holiday visits, havens of peace and quiet, enjoyed for a few short days.

But let us not forget that these, and all rural areas of Europe, must survive all year round, long after the tourists have left. The truth is that rural and remote areas are amongst Europe's poorest. The fact that, according to Eurostat, nearly five million full-time jobs in EU agriculture have disappeared in recent years illustrates the scale of the issue. As the new European parliament takes its seat, the challenge that MEPs must address is how to maintain and recreate vibrant rural economies throughout the European Union.

"The creation of a new biobased economic system built around biorefineries has the potential to transform rural communities across Europe"

The creation of a new biobased economic system built around biorefineries has the potential to transform rural communities across Europe. Renewable ethanol is the essential building block of this new economic system, it encourages increased farm investment, the adoption of best practice in farming, leading to substantial increases in crop yield and higher levels of output for the same acreage and better quality crops.

It gives farmers a much needed boost in productivity and income. With minimal outlay, farmers can diversify into feedstocks for ethanol and compete on a sustainable and progressive market where they make a positive net contribution to the economy. A new income stream allows lower-income farmers to invest in machinery, tillage systems and high quality seeds resulting in increased yields and more food and fuel for every acre. Because animal feed is a co-product of renewable ethanol production, an additional bonus for farmers is less expensive home-grown high-protein animal feed.

Second-generation ethanol production drives resourcefulness and productivity even further. With cellulosic ethanol, not only will farmers waste less but the waste is no longer unusable plant material and instead becomes a commodity of value, bringing in new revenue.

The decline in rural communities could be completely reversed by the development of a local biorefinery. This has already happened, with the renewable ethanol industry having created and sustained 70,000 direct and indirect jobs since 2003. Each new biorefinery might employ on average 100 full-time staff, including many highly-skilled positions, and create another 1000 full time jobs in transport, maintenance and other services. If such benefits could be replicated across poorer parts of Europe, entire rural regions could be revitalised.

The benefits of ethanol go beyond farmers and local communities to societies as a whole. Biorefineries use completely renewable agricultural products to produce a range of products for uses as wide ranging as fuel, high protein animal feed, gluten and electricity. They also have a vital role to play in reducing transport greenhouse gas emissions – from their own operations and the renewable ethanol from transport fuels they produce – and increasing our energy security by replacing oil imports from less stable regions of the world.

"By driving further agricultural efficiency, putting to use degraded and abandoned land, and applying these technologies Europe has the opportunity to transform our rural communities"

Europe has some of the most efficient agriculture in the world and is already well advanced in key biobased technologies. By driving further agricultural efficiency, putting to use degraded and abandoned land, and applying these technologies Europe has the opportunity to transform our rural communities.

To grasp this historic opportunity we must create the conditions and confidence that will lead to an extended network of European biorefineries, using European feedstock. We need a policy framework that supports this maturing sector and really incentivises industry and other actors to make the necessary investments.

This means quickly resolving the current discussions around the renewable energy and fuel quality directives, allowing renewable ethanol contribution to Europe's ambitions to grow and fostering the

deployment of advanced ethanol; re-focusing Horizon 2020, the common agricultural policy and structural funds towards biobased technologies and agricultural productivity; and recognising the vital importance of biorefineries and ethanol in the 2030 energy and climate framework and energy security strategy.

After this holiday season, once we return from our rural adventures let us not pack away the future of rural communities with our suitcases. Maintaining the status quo on rural development is simply not enough. There's an innovative, environmentally advantageous, wealth-generating opportunity right in front of us. Let's seize it.

### **About the author**

Rob Vierhout is secretary-general of ePure, the European renewable ethanol industry association

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