PM+: Threat of 'half-measures and legislative uncertainty' hanging over EU biofuels policy

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Opinion Plus

It's make or break time for the sustainable European production of advanced biofuels, warns Chris Malins.

Six years after MEPs first called on the European commission to address the issue of indirect land use change on European biofuel policy, the European parliament's environment committee is preparing to vote on the latest attempt to resolve the two main issues.

The current proposal contains two key elements designed to reduce the extent to which European biofuel consumption drives land use change and contributes to food insecurity, and by doing so support the transition to a more sustainable biofuel industry in Europe.

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These two elements are a cap on the contribution of biofuels from food crops to meeting European targets and enhanced incentives for a set of advanced biofuel pathways intended to deliver larger environmental benefits without negative social impacts.

The principle of a cap on the use of food-based fuels has been largely agreed by the European institutions, all that remains is to set the level somewhere between six and seven per cent.

The most important question left for MEPs and EU member states now is therefore how to promote advanced fuels. Will we get legislation that gives industry a clear basis upon which to invest, or will we be confronted by half-measures and further uncertainty?

This is important because there is a major opportunity within Europe to produce genuinely sustainable biofuels from resources including agricultural and forestry residues and municipal waste.

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In 2014, the international council on clean transportation (ICCT) worked with a coalition of industry and civil society representatives to publish a report called ‘Wasted: Europe’s untapped resource’.

In this report, we showed the potential for these biofuels to supply 16 per cent of European road transport fuel by 2030, even when the need to retain residues to support biodiversity, nutrient cycling and soil carbon were taken into account. Tapping the potential of biofuels from waste is not only an environmental opportunity it is also a major economic opportunity. Developing an advanced biofuels industry in Europe would mean creating tens of thousands of jobs in research, in plant construction and operation and in residue collection in the rural economy.

It would mean taking hundreds of millions of euros currently being spent on oil imports and putting it back into the rural economy. And it would put Europe in a leadership role in a new global industry, developing the technology to convert these resources to liquid fuels, and the sustainability standards to make sure it is done right.

The ICCT has followed-up the Wasted report by undertaking an assessment at member state level for 12 European countries. From France to Finland, Spain to Slovakia, every country we examined has more than enough waste and residue resources to meet a 1.25 per cent target for transport energy from advanced biofuels. The challenge is to accelerate commercialisation.

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Managed correctly, these advanced biofuels can be a win-win-win for Europe. But none of this will happen on its own.

Cellulosic biofuel plants require hundreds of millions of euros of investment, and mobilising this investment requires a policy framework that works and that investors believe in.

Targets must be ambitious but also realistic. And we must have the right list of biofuel pathways eligible for extra support: broad enough not to rule out real opportunities, but narrow enough to
ensure that the sustainable technologies of the future will not be out-competed by cheaper, less sustainable technologies.

As Europe anticipates a 2030 climate and energy framework where member states take increasing responsibility to carry Europe’s climate and economic goals forward, now is the time for the European institutions to set a clear policy direction into the future.

About the author

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