EU must tackle indirect land use change caused by biofuels

Written by Bas Eickhout MEP on 20 February 2015 in Opinion

The indirect land use change debate offers EU policymakers the opportunity to set an example to the rest of the world, writes Bas Eickhout.

The indirect land use change dossier is definitely one of the most debated files currently circulating the European parliament.

However, the Greens/EFA group's opinion on this issue is crystal clear: Europe must implement measures that tackle the indirect land use change caused by its biofuel policies.

Following the launch of the EU's renewable energy directive, European demand for biofuels has skyrocketed. The directive sets a 10 per cent target for the use of renewable energy in transport by 2020.

"Europe's climate policies are creating climate change instead of reducing it"
Unfortunately this directive is inflexible in the sense that CO2 reductions can only be obtained by switching to ‘renewable’ fuels. There is no room for alternative methods of making transport cleaner, such as increasing public transportation. Electric cars are not yet commonly used, so the 10 per cent target is mainly being met by turning food and energy crops into fuel.

Meanwhile, the EU's fuel quality directive establishes a six per cent decarbonisation target for Europe's transport fuels. This directive is more flexible than the RED, but without the right safeguards in place it is also driving demand for food and energy crops.

This has triggered an increase in agriculture production worldwide. Additional agricultural land has to be created, since the production of biofuels displaces food production to new land. This chain reaction is called indirect land use change (ILUC) and it causes perverse effects like deforestation, land grabbing and rising food prices.

The clearing of forests to plant crops leads to a loss of carbon sinks and therefore to an increase in CO2-emissions. For example, biodiesel is so harmful that it releases more emissions than the fossil diesel it replaces.

A study by the institute for European environmental policy indicates what will happen if we don't take action. Biofuel demand will lead to more carbon being released into the atmosphere, equivalent to adding 14 to 29 million extra cars onto Europe's roads. In other words, Europe's climate policies are creating climate change instead of reducing it.

"The Greens/EFA will do everything they can to avoid indirect land-use change stemming from EU policies"

People often seem to forget that addressing ILUC was the sole reason behind the entire review exercise in which we are currently engaged. If the negotiations lead to an agreement that fails to provide a complete solution to the issue, then it will not be supported by the Greens/EFA group.

Our main goal is therefore to implement ILUC factors in the greenhouse gas accounting under the renewable energy and fuel quality directives. We also want to make sure that these factors will still be in place after 2020.

By doing so, Europe will set an example to the rest of the world. A meaningful cap on first generation agricultural land and crop based biofuels, including energy crops, will also have to be put in place.

The Greens will support a separate advanced biofuel target, but we insist on strong safeguards. Mistakes made in the past should not be repeated.

By setting an extra target, we risk driving all residues and wastes with economic value to be burned as fuels with the help of subsidies. This could, for example, lead to the replacement of 'waste and residues' for palm oil in the chemicals industry.

Under such a scenario, our European policies would still cause ILUC and all the devastating social and environmental consequences attached to it.

The Greens/EFA will do everything they can to avoid indirect land-use change stemming from EU policies.

About the author
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