

## Electrification and green biofuels are within reach

Written by Seb Dance on 24 October 2016 in Opinion  
Opinion

Within the EU's legislative cycle, the time is right to start incentivising moves away from fossil fuels, argues Seb Dance.



Seb Dance | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

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Transport represents a quarter of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions, a figure that could rise to more than half with current trends. It is also the main cause of air pollution in our cities.

While other big-emitting industries in the EU, like electricity, have made huge technological leaps in greening their operations, transport emissions remain stubbornly high. This is a real worry for EU citizens, many of whom live in cities whose air is clogged by pollutants.

It is estimated that over 400,000 Europeans die prematurely from poor air quality every year, while better air quality conditions in cities could see life expectancy increase by around 22 months.

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These poor health outcomes can be put down to the presence of high levels of both nitrogen oxides (NOx) and particulate matter (PM) in the air; a significant part of which originates from road transport.

Recently the European Commission has responded to concerns about the climate change impact of road transport by publishing a communication on transport decarbonisation. The main proposals are electrification, energy efficiency and a push towards greater use of biofuels. Each of these approaches deserves a proper discussion and a debate in the European Parliament.

Acting on air pollution and greenhouse gas mitigation will help meet the EU's long term climate targets and bring considerable health benefits. Perhaps the one proposal that has most captured the imagination is electrification.

Electrified vehicles are already being driven on our streets, and manufacturers are lining up to deliver new electric solutions for existing vehicles. However growth in this sector is likely to be low, with electrically powered transport expected to comprise just four per cent of transport energy by 2030.

However we must consider that the electricity that drives the vehicles is only as green as the plant that powers it, and if our electricity continues to be reliant on fossil fuels, then overall emissions will continue to rise.

Turning to efficiency measures, the Commission is very fond of saying the cheapest fuel is the one you do not use. Efficiency measures in transport can deliver fiscal savings and emissions reductions. Currently the most important tool in the Commission's arsenal are car emissions standards; a policy that requires gradual reductions over time of vehicles' air pollution and CO2 emissions.

My work as Parliament's S&D group coordinator on the committee of Inquiry into emission measurements in the automotive sector set up following the dieselgate scandal, has shown me that these measures are not at all robust and are open to manipulation by manufacturers and member states.

The committee's findings so far have shown that reported emissions of both NOx and PM are vastly unrepresentative of the actual figures, while fuel economy figures are also overstated by outdated lab tests. Fuel economy figures have in fact been found to be as much as 40 per cent worse on average than labelled.

As a result, less than half of the on-paper reductions in CO2 emissions since 2001 have actually been realised. In order for fuel efficiency to play any real part in this plan then, it is vital the commission ensures the testing used to report these figures is robust and free from manipulation.

Finally we come to biofuels. I worked as S&D group shadow rapporteur on the so called 'ILUC' file, which addressed the unintended environmental consequences of the EU's first big push toward biofuels.

Aside from that fact that first generation biofuels have been shown to cause undesirable environmental and social damage in the Global South, we must also look at the realities of biofuel use for emission reductions.

The recent Globium report from the Commission, and further analysis from the environmental NGO Transport & Environment have showed that the net emissions from the use of biofuels appears to be greater than the conventional fuels they aimed to replace.

Furthermore, recent research suggests that the reported reductions in particulate matter may have been overstated. Should biofuels remain a centrepiece of the commission's strategy to cut emissions, it is critical that attention now be focussed on developing real 'second generation', or 'advanced' biofuels.

Significant resources must be invested into research and development on fuels from waste, and special consideration must be given to ensure that sustainability criteria are robust and respected.

Only then, should biofuels be given the policy boost to make them mainstream. Within the legislative cycle, the time is right to begin to incentivise a decisive move away from fossil fuels.

The revision of the renewable energy directive offers an opportunity in November this year and the fuel quality directive next year. To complement the shift to greener fuels, the Commission must also accelerate its work on introducing new efficiency measures.

Electrification and truly green biofuels are within reach if we start to push for them now. These measures alone are not the answer, but perhaps properly handled and incentivised, they can be the catalyst for the change that is needed.

## About the author

Seb Dance (UK) is S&D group coordinator on the committee of inquiry into emission measurements in the auto industry

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