

Biofuels: EU must distinguish between good and bad crops

Written by Jadwiga Wiśniewska on 30 October 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

It's crucial not to put all biofuels in the same basket, and differentiate the good from the bad, argues Jadwiga Wiśniewska.



Jadwiga Wiśniewska | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Biofuels have a long history. They were initially seen as a wonderful solution for our environmental concerns, but lately they have been considered a source of concern in themselves.

This is because of the so-called indirect land use change - agricultural land providing food and forests is being turned into plant crops to produce biofuels, with devastating effects on climate, environment, agriculture and societies.

This is true, but this is not the whole truth. More precisely, this is truer for some crops than for others.

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A symbolic example of such an effect is palm oil, which Parliament rightly wants to eradicate from the EU's energy mix. We adopted a resolution to this effect in April with a huge majority and the ECR group was part of that effort. But what is easy in a non-legislative resolution is not that easy in the legislative process ahead of us.

An outright ban on palm oil is not possible as it would easily be undermined in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), by its exporters. Therefore, we should work on a way to distinguish between bad crops, such as palm oil, and good crops, such as domestic rapeseed or corn. These crops do not produce the same side effects as palm oil.

On the contrary, their production often goes hand in hand with wider agricultural goals and is a great source of protein for breeding farms, reducing our demand for imported feeds, often based on genetically modified crops.

Unfortunately, despite the clear advantages of some of these crops, the Commission is putting them all in the same basket, and has proposed further limitations, just two years after legislators agreed a seven per cent cap on conventional biofuels.

At the same time, the Commission suggests boosting the uptake of advanced biofuels, which are practically non-existent in the current energy mix.

It's unclear how the Commission plans to encourage massive investments in these biofuels, when its constant U-turns on the topic are weakening trust in the markets. Often, those investing in advanced biofuels are the same investing in conventional biofuels.

They need a legal framework which is predictable, respects investments that have already been made and will deliver effects in the future.

Conventional biofuels should not be relegated to the past. With the right incentives, they will offer huge greenhouse gas savings.

Today this reduction is already more than 50 per cent - sometimes even around 90 per cent - compared to conventional fuels. Luckily, it seems Parliament is slowly starting to recognise this potential.

The opinion adopted by the agriculture committee, which makes space for highly sustainable biofuels based on an objective criteria, is a good way forward. Let us hope the environment committee - and all of Parliament - will be inspired by this approach and put forward the right incentives to develop both competitive and environmentally friendly biofuels.

About the author

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