

Why we need ecological biofuels

Written by Paloma López Bermejo on 16 April 2018 in Opinion
Opinion

We must establish concrete criteria for determining how sustainable growing, manufacturing, transporting and marketing biofuels is, says Paloma López Bermejo.



Paloma López Bermejo | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

For over 30 years, we have struggled to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, other atmospheric damage, and any human activities that promote global warming. Today, we should be able to better legislate and make laws that make it easier to concretely decide what is sustainable and what is not.

In recent decades, the quest for emission reduction has felt like boxers trading blows. On one hand, climate change denialists rejecting any moves to protect the environment, while on the other, the new bio- and eco-industry sector are adapting with new products - sometimes no different to what was previously available.

Biofuel and biomass energy producers operate in such a huge industry that it is difficult to pinpoint what is and what isn't truly sustainable. European regulations that are designed to promote clean and renewable energies should aim higher.

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Simply distinguishing between biomass, biofuels or bioliquids - as is currently the case - is not enough. We must establish concrete criteria for determining how sustainable it is to grow, manufacture, transport and market these products.

When Parliament began working on the new renewable energy directive in June 2016, it asked the Commission to come up with more accurate sustainability criteria on bio-energy, mainly to determine whether it was made with biomass from forests. For certain farm and forest-produced biofuels, the damage they cause to the environment outweighs the benefits.

Failing to implement a mechanism to regulate what is sustainable and what isn't could result in devastating consequences, such as destroying rain forests and soil cover because of biomass waste, as well as greenhouse gas emissions caused by transporting biofuels.

We must bear in mind the effect that any large industry could have on communities' social and economic conditions. Land use change has hit certain areas particularly hard, often displacing agricultural food production and forcing people from the countryside into other regions or cities.

We cannot determine if production matches the criteria on greenhouse gas emissions reduction without taking into account how this production affects populations, food security and other natural resources such as water.

This was highlighted in a parliamentary resolution in April 2017 on the palm oil industry and deforestation, and searching for more effective sustainability criteria, also in social and biodiversity terms.

In addition, biomass is a renewable source but it is finite. Its availability depends on time, water and land use, and this must be taken into consideration during impact assessments.

The new renewable energy directive is now in the trilogue phase after being voted through Parliament. It is deficient on several points, but it was important for Parliament to take advantage of this opportunity to pass amendments and shape regulation on sustainability.

MEPs voted to ensure the regulation focuses on the efficiency and optimisation of biomass storage, and on avoiding further damage to biodiversity and ecosystems, while taking account of global emissions statistics. The trilogues are proving difficult, due to reservations around ways to effectively

restrict emissions.

It's important to promote the use of biomass for energy production that do not destroy soil structures, and are free of drying elements. We must uphold the high environmental value of primary resources.

The directive on using natural sources of energy must maintain a sense of levelled evaluation of the production process and reducing greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible.

In our quest to reach our emission reduction targets, we mustn't damage ecosystems, societies and economies. We must shift from a polluting and unsustainable long-term energy model to a healthier model, not just by simply replacing one energy source by another, but by actual transformation.

About the author

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