

Biofuels in the renewable energy directive: The last call

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Ahead of this week's RED II negotiations, Géraldine Kutas explains where policymakers are getting it wrong on biofuels - and how they can fix their mistakes before it's too late.



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On 17 May representatives of the European Parliament, member states and the European Commission will meet to negotiate the provisions on biofuels in the renewables directive (RED II).

This might be the last chance to find a compromise that ensures the future of a technology that is critical to reduce carbon emissions in transport. The European Parliament and member states have improved on the initial proposal by the European Commission, but more needs to be done.

Let's start with the good news. Parliament and Council have included a renewables target for transport. Transport accounts for about 25 per cent of total EU greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and

is one of the few sectors that has increased emissions over the last 25 years. An ambitious target is therefore necessary to seriously tackle emissions in this sector. The respective 12 per cent and 14 per cent targets proposed by Parliament and Council might not be ambitious enough, but are steps in the right direction.

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The Commission's attempt to cut the cap of crop-based biofuels to 3.8 per cent would have sounded the death knell for the only technology in Europe that so far has had a real impact on limiting GHG emissions in road transport. By effectively killing the industry, the 3.8 per cent target would also have destroyed any hope of ever scaling up production of next-generation biofuels. The cap needs to be maintained at seven per cent.

However, the Council's proposal to allow member states to reduce their renewable targets in transport and individually set lower caps on plant-based biofuels is misguided. This will fragment the market and fundamentally undermine the decarbonisation of transport in Europe. The proposal for multiple counting of certain alternative fuels is also a very bad idea. This is just an accounting ruse that would drastically reduce the ambitions and effectiveness of RED II. A better way to incentivise alternative fuels that need extra support would be through appropriate targets.

The Bulgarian EU Council presidency's attempt to bridge the gulf between Parliament and Council is to be commended, but unfortunately the wording will satisfy no one, as it is extremely vague and creates massive uncertainty. Suggesting that member states be allowed to set lower limits for biofuels that lead to deforestation or use of land with high carbon stock if they also set lower limits for biofuels that can be considered 'close substitutes' is vague in the extreme. Without a clear definition of what is meant by 'close substitute', this will create uncertainty for investors and importers.

In the proposed compromise, biofuels with a low ILUC risk would be excluded from the lower limits EU members would be allowed to set. However, there is no clear definition or criteria for what constitutes a low-ILUC risk biofuel, and developing such a definition is proving extremely difficult. It would require reliable and transparent ILUC assessments that until now have been lacking.

According to the GLOBIOM study which is based on eight-year-old data, Brazilian sugarcane, for example, is among the crop-based feedstocks with the lowest ILUC emissions, but there are no clear criteria to understand whether this would be considered a low-ILUC feedstock. Clearly, carbon saving potential is the only reasonable criteria for the sustainability of biofuels.

The idea of basing the lower limits for biofuels on European Commission bioenergy sustainability reports is simply wrong. What legitimacy does the EU have to assess foreign nations' fight against deforestation?

Such an approach would represent a dangerous infringement upon the governance and sovereignty of independent nations by the EU. Any such assessment should be based on one of the many existing certification schemes that are respected by industry and third countries alike, and recognised by the European Commission.

Brazilian bioethanol has proven – unambiguously – the massive contribution that certain biofuels can make in the fight against climate change. In 13 years, Brazil reduced its carbon emissions in the transport sector by more than 400 million tonnes thanks to bioethanol. That’s almost five times the performance of the EU.

Thursday 17 May will be a tough day for the negotiators, who still have a lot of work to do to achieve a workable solution. This is their last chance to get it right.

About the author

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