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Media Brief

Bioenergy laid bare: Fuelling climate change, fuelling hunger

Introduction

This autumn, the European Parliament and EU member states are set to decide on an essential piece of the EU's climate & energy policy for 2030: the bioenergy rules in the Renewable Energy Directive, starting with a key vote in the Parliament's Environment Committee on 23 October.

The bioenergy industry has successfully portrayed itself to the EU as a sustainable, renewable energy solution, leading to a vast expansion in the use of biofuels and other types of bioenergy. This in turn has resulted in the EU transport sector guzzling food crops from millions of hectares of land, increases in food prices, deforestation and land grabs. It has led to the rest of the energy sector driving forest logging just to burn trees for energy. And all of this with billions of Euros of subsidies - and without really saving emissions.

The benefits to the industry of continuing the current policy until 2030 are obvious. For the climate, the environment, forests, global food security and Europe's own sustainable development, however, business as usual would be disastrous. MEPs on the Environment Committee have a chance to stop this madness when they vote on the Eickhout report in the 2030 climate and energy package.

MEPs must correct the completely inadequate proposals from the European Commission, resist the pressure from the industry and vote for rules that ensure bioenergy finally does more good than harm.

Bioenergy does have a role to play in the EU's transition to a fully renewable energy system, but supplies of genuinely sustainable bioenergy are limited and strict regulation is needed to ensure it delivers real benefits.

Background

Bioenergy makes up about 65% of the EU's renewable energy mix and has been trumpeted by its advocates as a major source of clean energy for the future. Wood is already the biggest single source of renewable heat and electricity while biofuels from food and feed crops make up most of the renewable energy in transport.

But there is now compelling scientific evidence that many of the types of bioenergy incentivised within the EU either offer no carbon benefits over the fossil alternative or are



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actually counterproductive in climate terms. The EU's existing renewable energy and climate policies lack any meaningful sustainability criteria for bioenergy, with disastrous results. For the use of food-based biofuels the EU has been forced to impose some limits, but for most forms of bioenergy there are still no limits of any kind.

The Commission's new proposals for bioenergy rules after 2020 are little better and do not impose the limits and safeguards needed to prevent the continuation of the damage caused by bioenergy and ensure that only types that offer genuine climate benefits over fossil fuels are incentivised.

NGO positions and quotes

The climate clock is ticking, and bioenergy risks speeding it up

Bioenergy from genuine wastes and residues with no other uses has a role to play in decarbonisation of the EU energy system. But using land to grow biofuel crops and burning trees and stumps for energy is completely counterproductive in climate terms and can increase emissions for decades. The sustainability criteria for bioenergy proposed by the European Commission are totally inadequate in this regard and ignore compelling scientific evidence. MEPs must change them, either by putting in proper greenhouse gas criteria that include all relevant factors or excluding from incentives feedstocks that deliver no climate benefit.

"In many ways wood is just very fresh coal. And burning whole trees – or purpose grown crops - [is no way to tackle climate change](#). But nothing in the Commission proposals will stop that happening. MEPs must seize this chance to fix the rules, so that bioenergy in the EU delivers genuine climate benefits over the fossil alternative" – Alex Mason, Senior Policy Officer, WWF European Policy Office

Biofuels in transport are driving deforestation and increasing emissions

The EU's cleaner transport fuels policy has [increased rather than reduced transport emissions](#). The EU's previous biofuels policy focused on achieving big volumes of renewable fuels but failed to adopt proper quality standards. Because of this, the EU's biofuel market is now dominated by crop biodiesel (around 75%), which [is on average 80% worse for the climate than fossil diesel](#) and also increasingly sourced from [palm oil](#) and other imported vegetable oils, with disastrous [social and environmental impacts](#).

"European drivers should no longer be forced to burn high-emitting food-based biofuels, especially palm oil biodiesel, which is three times worse for the climate than fossil diesel. Instead, the law should promote truly sustainable advanced biofuels and renewable electricity in transport." - Laura Buffet, clean fuels manager at Transport & Environment.

Bioenergy expansion has proved damaging for forests

Wood is the single biggest source of renewable energy in the EU today. The EU's current [bioenergy policies have](#) led to [growing forest harvests and burning of trees for energy](#),



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sometimes in highly inefficient old coal-fired power stations. This is neither climate friendly nor an efficient use of limited biomass resources and actually threatens forest ecosystems and biomass supplies to other forest-based industries. EU bioenergy policies also increasingly [threaten forests elsewhere in the world](#). Recently almost [200 eminent scientists warned for the negative climate impacts](#) of forest bioenergy, and urged the EU to ensure climate- and energy policies were science-based by ending support for burning trees directly for energy.

“The EU urgently needs to re-think its perverse climate strategy of incentivising burning forests for energy. Compelling scientific evidence now shows that the increasing use of wood for bioenergy worsens climate change. The Commission’s proposal fails to reverse this. It is now up to the Parliament and Council to stand up for forests and the climate.”
Linde Zuidema, Forest & Climate campaigner at Fern

“The EU’s renewable energy policies have failed on bioenergy. We need to limit the use of bioenergy. The EU can’t continue to incentivize the use of whole trees or food crops for energy and needs to set the record straight in the review of its renewable energy policies.”
Sini Eräjää, EU Bioenergy Policy Officer, BirdLife Europe & Central Asia

A hidden levy on the poor

The Renewable Energy Directive imposes a hidden levy on the poor by [increasing food prices](#) and the biofuels target it mandates in the transport sector poses a permanent threat to global food security. A market skewed towards biofuels acts as a shock multiplier when there are food shortages caused by weather events, trade disruptions or low stocks.

This is particularly important given that, since the EU began promoting biofuels, the world has been hit by two major [food price spikes, pushing tens of millions into poverty](#) and, according to the [FAO’s latest report](#) the estimated number of undernourished people increased from 777 million in 2015 to 815 million in 2016.

European crop-based biofuels, even if their feedstocks are ‘home grown’, displace agriculture onto new land and destroy forests elsewhere in the world. Around the globe people are struggling to defend and preserve their livelihoods in the face of ever-expanding plantations used for biodiesel or ethanol production. Indigenous and community leaders in countries like Indonesia, Liberia, Peru or Columbia are confronted with [grave human rights violations](#) sparked by the ever expanding EU demand for cheap agricultural commodities for bioenergy.

“In a world where hunger is on the rise again, using food for fuel should be something of the past. EU biofuel targets must be scrapped. Only sustainable alternative fuels made from waste and residues should be promoted.” - Marc-Olivier Herman, Economic Justice Policy Lead, Oxfam



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Regressive policies on waste

The RED has been one of the key obstacles to the achievement of the progressive goals of EU waste legislation. The proposals for RED II will further hinder the transition towards more sustainable waste management systems and a circular economy. It misguidedly provides financial incentives for burning of mixed municipal waste for energy, rather than separating and recycling it, thus disincentivising other more environmentally sound options.

Quote: *“Fortunately, the European Parliament can still amend the flaws of the Commission’s proposal by taking concrete steps to ensure it is in line with EU waste policies and the waste hierarchy. It must ensure bioenergy from waste helps, rather than hinders, separate collection and recycling targets.”* Janek Vahk, Development and Policy Coordinator, Zero Waste Europe.

Joint call by NGOs

We are calling on MEPs and Member States to adopt **a truly ambitious and sustainable Renewable Energy Directive for the period 2021-2030.**

This means **ending support for unsustainable bioenergy from crops and whole trees** and giving priority to genuinely low carbon renewables such as solar and wind. Bioenergy has a role to play, but only where made from genuine wastes and residues that have no other uses.

In the upcoming votes in the European Parliament and in the Council negotiations we call on MEPs and Member States to support the following amendments to the Renewable Energy Directive (REDII):

1. Introduce **no new renewable energy targets for the transport sector** and **phase out support for all biofuels made from crops that compete with food** and feed for land and other precious resources.
2. Ensure that **only truly advanced biofuels** made from waste and residues with no other uses **are promoted**, by lowering the mandates that will be imposed on fuel providers and by introducing adequate sustainability criteria. Promote renewable electricity in transport.
3. Make sure the sustainability criteria apply to all bioenergy plants of significant scale by **lowering the thresholds for the size of energy installations** from 20 MW to 1 MW.
4. **Only support the use of forest residues and waste** to produce energy, not ‘stemwood’ (tree trunks) and stumps.



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5. **End support for inefficient electricity production from biomass** - including support for co-firing of biomass with fossil fuels.
6. Ensure only bioenergy that delivers near term climate benefits is promoted, by ensuring **full and correct accounting for GHG emissions**, including from indirect land use change, foregone sequestration, changes in carbon stock and combustion emissions.
7. Introduce **new criteria for the uses of waste for energy** to ensure respect for the waste hierarchy and exclude the use of municipal mixed waste, to support separate collection and recycling targets.

Timeline for bioenergy reform

European Parliament

- 25/9/2017: *vote on AGRI opinion*
- 10/10/2017: vote on DEVE opinion
- 12/10/2017: vote on TRAN opinion
- 23/10/2017: key vote on ENVI opinion – (leading committees, together with ITRE)
- 28/11/2017: key vote on ITRE report – (leading committees, together with ENVI)
- Dec 2017-February 2018: vote in the Plenary of the Parliament

Member States

- Nov-Dec 2017: meetings of the Energy Working Party on REDII
- 18/12/2017: Energy Council – Ministers to discuss or decide on Council position

Resources

- [Frontera Invisible](#), an award-winning documentary about palm biodiesel in Colombia.
- Zero Waste Europe: [Position Paper](#) on the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive.
- [Biofuelsreform.org](#)
- [Eubioenergy.com](#)
- WWF: [briefing paper on EU bioenergy policy](#)
- T&E: [position paper on the recast of the Renewable Energy Directive](#)
- Oxfam briefing paper: [Burning land, burning the climate - The biofuel industry's capture of EU bioenergy policy](#) and accompanying [media release](#): 'Oxfam report exposes EU lobby firepower of biofuel industry behind destructive bioenergy policy'
- Fern briefing paper: '[Burning trees for energy is no solution to climate change](#)'
- T&E briefing paper: '[Biofuels policies do increase food prices](#)'
- Joint statement Birdlife Europe, Fern and Transport & Environment '[Ensuring Bioenergy comes clean in the Clean Energy Package](#)'



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