

Views

The columnist

Annalee Newitz on the monetisation of online emotion **p24**

Letters

The different ways people use language about time **p26**

Aperture

Whale sharks stuff their faces off the Indonesian coast **p28**

Culture

Your garden can be every bit as exciting as the rainforest **p30**

Culture columnist

Games on mental illness need depth, says Jacob Aron **p32**

Comment

The biofuel delusion

UK parliamentarians want to add more bioethanol to petrol. That is a dangerous distraction from real climate action, says **Michael Le Page**



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bioethanol for blending with petrol wouldn't get us close to what is needed.

Not all biofuels are bad. Those made from genuine waste really can tick all the boxes, but they are in limited supply. When it comes to petrol, there is a far better alternative: electricity. So say the UK government's official climate advisers. "We don't see a long-term role for biofuels in surface transport given other low-carbon options available," a spokesperson for the Committee on Climate Change tells me. "The shift to electric cars and vans is both low carbon and cost saving."

A pity, then, that while others such as China and Norway motor ahead, the UK is going backwards. If the UK is to meet its net-zero target, radical change is required, including ending the sale of petrol cars by 2030.

Cutting emissions is admittedly not the main driver behind the MPs advocating for more biofuel. Instead, the key reason they give is to save "the British bioethanol industry" and prevent "the loss of thousands of jobs".

The saving jobs argument can be used to justify anything, from coal mining to whaling. Suffice to say that the all-out effort needed to get to net zero would generate a huge number of jobs. We need to get on with it instead of wasting time and money on E10 fuel. ■

the global demand for farmland and results in the loss of ever more wilderness. By pushing up food prices and encouraging land grabs, biofuels also deepen poverty and social division.

They aren't even that great at limiting climate change. Growing them produces greenhouse gases in all kinds of ways, from carbon dioxide when fertilisers are manufactured to nitrous oxide when they are applied to fields. Add to that people cutting down forests that store lots of carbon to create more farmland.

The official carbon footprint of petrol and diesel in the European Union is 84 grams of

carbon dioxide or the equivalent for every megajoule of energy (CO₂ eq/MJ). According to a 2017 study by the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK, producing bioethanol from wheat – the main crop used for this purpose in the UK – emits around 100g CO₂ eq/MJ on average, once land-use change is taken into account.

Other sources at least emit less than petrol and diesel. Bioethanol made from sugar beet – another crop used in the UK – comes in at around 50g CO₂ eq/MJ on average, counting land use.

But the UK's official aim is to reduce its emissions to net zero by 2050. Even using only sugar-beet

THE UK should burn more alcohol to go greener, a group of MPs styling themselves the All-Party Parliamentary Group for British Bioethanol said last week. They want the UK government to increase the amount of bioethanol in standard unleaded petrol from 5 to 10 per cent.

Such "E10" fuel is already sold in many countries, including the US, Australia and several European nations. Yet it is a social and environmental disaster.

Biodiversity is under threat, and we need to preserve habitats, not destroy them. But growing crops to make biofuel increases