

News

Biofuels could increase emissions

Monday, March 01, 2010

Using fossil fuels in vehicles could be better for the environment than using some biofuels says a leaked report for the Department of Transport.

The Times claims to have viewed the study, which shows biofuel production will result in millions of acres of forest being logged or burnt down and converted into plantations.

The European Union, already under heavy criticism for 'weak' sustainability criteria for biofuels invests nearly £3bn a year in subsidies for biofuels.

Yet the report says some of the most commonly used biofuel crops fail to meet even minimum sustainability standards set by the Commission.

Under the standard, each litre of biofuel should reduce emissions by at least 35 per cent compared with burning a litre of fossil fuel. Yet the study shows that palm oil increases emissions by 31 per cent because of the carbon released when forest and grassland is turned into plantations.

Clearing rainforest for biofuel plantations releases carbon stored in trees and soil. It takes 840 years for palm oil plantation to soak up carbon emitted when the rainforest replaced was burnt.

The destruction of rainforest in Sumatra has led to the near extinction of the orang-utan in the Indonesian island.

There is now four times as much land used for palm oil plantations as there is containing natural orang-utan rainforest habitat.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that the population has declined by 50% in recent decades and the Indonesian government admits that 50,000 orang-utans have died as a result of de-forestation.

A BBC Panorama investigation into clear-cutting in Indonesian Borneo found that the thirst for land on which to plant palm plantations is encroaching on areas that the Indonesian government has deemed to be off-limits.

Kenneth Richter of Friends of the Earth said: "The billions of subsidy for biofuels would be better spent on greener cars and improved public transport."

The Times also claims that the European Commission has conducted its own research, but is refusing to publish the results.

Features

We must agree new, stronger targets on biodiversity loss

Monday, March 08, 2010

Ahead of two major reports to be released this week on the state of wildlife in Britain and Europe, new Environment Commissioner Janez Potocnik considers the need for new EU and global targets to halt biodiversity loss

We live on a planet which has finite resources and a fragile ecology. As the world's population grows to 7 billion people, the environment on which we depend for food, health and livelihood is facing enormous pressure. Sustainability is no longer just a moral issue; it is also becoming an issue of self-interest. It is not just about how we will leave our planet to future generations, but also about ensuring there are sufficient resources for our own generation.

Sustainability is about balance and responsibility. Europe's environmental footprint is one of the largest on the planet. Our consumption and production patterns contribute to many of today's environmental problems, such as global warming, pollution, the depletion of natural resources and biodiversity loss. EU citizens make up only 7% of the world's population and yet they use around 20% of the world's natural resources. This is clearly unsustainable.

Besides a responsibility to respect our planet's environmental limits, the fact is that preserving the environment makes enormous economic, social and business sense. We may not have a silver bullet to take us out of recession, but we have a green one. Reaching higher levels of environmental protection can cost money and involve administration and regulation. But this is an investment that quickly pays off and ultimately pays for itself many times over.

The Commission's long-term goal is for the EU is to become a knowledge-based, resource-efficient economy. Developing a low-carbon economy and stimulating green growth, innovation and jobs will be one of the main priorities of the EU's 2020 Strategy – a 10-year economic plan to achieve this vision. Reinforcing the contribution of environmental policy and translating it into reality will be a central challenge.

Resource-efficiency will be a critical component of any strategy to protect our environment and enhance our competitiveness. It will mean putting in place the right mix of smart regulation, incentives and market-based mechanisms to foster eco-innovation and sustainable consumption and production, finding ways to promote the changes needed which fully respect our levels of environmental ambition. This will include action plans for eco-innovation and environmental technologies to make the EU more resource-efficient.

While technology can help us solve many of the major environmental challenges facing us, it will not provide all the answers. We must concentrate on how to break the link between growth and resource use. This will involve changing behaviour across the wider economy and society. For many businesses the concept of resource-efficiency is already second nature and is becoming more and more attractive. And with good reason – it can bring considerable financial dividends. It is estimated that UK businesses could save themselves between £5.6 and £7.4 billion a year by using resources more efficiently. In the EU it is estimated that around 20% of material use is inefficient. Boosting material efficiency by 20% could increase economic growth by 1% and could create a significant number of new jobs.

The more we are aware of the real and inherent value of our environment, the more effectively we will be able to design policies to combine our economic, social and environmental goals. It is not just our natural resources that are disappearing at an alarming rate. Global biodiversity is under severe threat. More than one third of species assessed are threatened with extinction and an estimated 60% of the Earth's ecosystem services have been degraded in the last 50 years. Nature provides us with clean air, fresh water, food and healthy soil and helps regulates our climate. We can no longer take these free services for granted.

Despite significant efforts and some positive results, neither the EU's 2010 target of halting biodiversity loss, nor the global target of significantly reducing it will be met. We must seize the opportunity offered by 2010, the international year of biodiversity, to address the challenge of biodiversity loss. The real value of biodiversity and ecosystems and the importance of soil, water, land use and forestry must be fully recognised. The link between biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation is critical. New EU and global targets are needed and we are already working on establishing these, but targets are not enough. We will need an ambitious action plan, and I am aware that my biggest challenge will be to make sure that it can deliver results.

If we are to achieve ambitious environmental objectives, we must act on many policy fronts. Implementing and reviewing existing environmental legislation will support the move towards more sustainable growth and continue to ensure that negative impacts of our activities on the environment and human health are prevented. There is a lot we can do through effective enforcement of laws that are already on the statute books. Not only is this already agreed and therefore quickly implementable, but effective implementation provides the legal certainty, the level playing field and the predictability that business needs and expects.

There is no doubt that today we are facing serious environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss and natural resource depletion. Our world is fragile and it is this very fragility which makes the environment such a key part of our positive agenda for the future. As policy makers we have important responsibilities but as individuals too we all have a fundamental duty to be good stewards of our planet. What could be more fundamental than the stewardship of the air we breathe, the ground we walk on or the water we drink?