

Commission withholding key research on environmental impacts of biofuels

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Brussels - The European Commission is refusing to release scientific research on EU biofuel policies, frustrating efforts to bring to light the environmental damage that would result from current biofuel policies. The research is likely to confirm the findings of numerous scientific studies that show several types of biofuels cause more emissions than conventional fossil fuels (1).

The Renewable Energy Directive, agreed to as part of a wider package of EU climate legislation in late 2008, requires Member States to use renewable sources to meet 10% of their transport needs by 2020. This target is expected to be met, in large part, by biofuels. It was assumed that such renewables use would reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, although early science indicated significant indirect impacts of biofuel production on land use and emissions. Concerns over these impacts compelled the European Parliament and the Council to require the Commission to analyse and act on the issue. The scientific research being withheld is the result of this analysis.

A well-known consequence of biofuel production is that it will result in the conversion of forests into cropland as land under cultivation expands to make up for production shifted from the food to the energy market— known as indirect land-use change (ILUC). The consequences of ILUC can be the most important factor in assessing a biofuel's environmental impact. The result could be biofuels sold in Europe that actually create more greenhouse gas emissions over their production lifecycle than conventional sources of petrol and diesel.

Environmental groups BirdLife International and Transport & Environment, and the environmental law organisation ClientEarth, are demanding the immediate release of studies ordered by the Commission. One study, carried out for the Commission's Directorate General for Agriculture, was completed as far back as July 2009, yet it is being withheld.

The Commission must disclose the information to the public under the EU's access to documents legislation. The original request was submitted on 15 October 2009 – 120 days ago. In a letter sent this week, dated 8 February 2010, the Commission informed the coalition that it would not meet the statutory time-limit to disclose the documents.

The Commission's reluctance to put scientific information in the public domain is particularly worrying against the backdrop of other recent developments. Last week leaked guidance on biofuels prepared by the Commission for Member States said environmentally destructive palm oil plantations should be reclassified as forests therefore avoiding a breach of sustainability criteria. (2)

Nusa Urbancic of Transport & Environment said: "The Commission already ignored the scientific evidence that most biofuels cause more harm than good when it came up with the latest biofuels targets, and it is now withholding its own research into the issue. But that approach is already leading to widespread environmental damage and will create far more problems in the future. The EU must revise its policy on biofuels to ensure that only those that bring benefits are supported by European policy. "

Tim Grabel of ClientEarth said: "This is a violation of bedrock European law on access to information, and a slap in the face to meaningful public participation in environmental decision-making. That the Commission would violate the public's right to access critical scientific research that discloses the true impacts of its biofuel policies is revealing. Where there is smoke, there is fire. We are reviewing the merits of these violations and will take the necessary steps to ensure that this information is made available."

Ariel Brunner from BirdLife International said: "The story of EU biofuels policy is one of wishful thinking and policy-based evidence. It is time for evidence-based policy."

(1) See review of studies on indirect land use change impacts:

www.transportenvironment.org/Publications/prep_hand_out/lid/522

(2) See EUobserver:

<http://euobserver.com/19/29410>