

Biofuels and Biofools

European politicians are enthralled to the biofuels lobby - they are living a fantasy and it's time to wake up to the reality of an industry driving deforestation, land grabbing and poverty, says MOLLY SCOTT CATO MEP

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In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy happily skips along the yellow brick road believing that she is on a path of discovery and progress. She eventually discovers of course that the wizard is a small, powerless man on a high stool and the whole thing has been a dream.

While Dorothy came to her senses, many MEPs deciding on biofuel policy are still seeking out the mythical Emerald City when it comes to renewables, stubbornly clinging to the idea that biofuels are a viable and ethical alternative to fossil fuels.

The reality is that as long as the EU encourages the growth of the biofuel industry, a resulting shortage of land for food will drive more deforestation and leave many of the world's poorest in Asia, Africa and Latin America hungry.

Lobbyists and politicians driving a destructive EU Directive

A huge body of evidence has directly linked the 2009 EU [Renewable Energy Directive](#) (RED) with land use change, human rights abuses and climate devastation.

According to [research](#) carried out in 2010, an area of 445,000km² (the size of Sweden) of cropland and forest is needed to meet the EU's biofuel demands. Renewables policy in the EU has massive global reach, driving land grabbing and deforestation; leaving people hungry and destroying our last chance to save our climate.

In 2017 with the recast of the Renewable Energy Directive (REDII), there is a real opportunity to reduce the negative impacts of biofuel demand and reduce CO₂ emissions by preserving forests and wetlands that soak up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

But the review is being hijacked by an extremely powerful biofuel industry lobby, who [spent over €14m](#) and hired nearly 400 lobbyists at EU level between 2015 and 2016 alone.

This lobby are currently pushing to maintain the destructive 7% target for biofuels in the transport sector until 2030. With current biofuel usage at around 4%, this target would dramatically boost biofuel production. And if that wasn't enough, they are even pushing to add new targets that would dramatically increase destructive crop-based biofuels.

In the Agriculture and Rural Affairs committee of which I'm a member, the conservative, neoliberal and far-right alliance are more than happy to push the industry line, and to support this murderous policy.

But the socialists too are complicit in this and have even advocated a doubling of crop-based biofuels in transport. They have all fallen prey to a series of myths being peddled by the biofuels lobby.

The lobbyists biofuels myths

Myth 1: “Protecting investors”

The industry maintains that production must be maintained to protect ‘investors’ who were previously encouraged to put money into biofuels, before the unintended consequences of the EU policy became known. But this argument falls flat when we see that investments made in conventional biofuels before 2010 have already been paid back, or will be before this decade is out.

The Commission’s original proposal was precisely to phase out these damaging investments. Secondly, with the strong political commitments to carbon emissions reductions in the Paris Agreement, a further signal to investors to place their capital in the biofuels sector by increasing thresholds, will simply create a ‘carbon bubble’ – setting them up to lose their money and acquire ‘stranded assets’. It is clear that such destructive investment must be phased out.

Myth 2: Supporting farmers

Ending support for crop based biofuels would put the future of EU farmers at risk, argue advocates. This is because the production of crops like rapeseed which is used in bioethanol provide a significant income for many EU farmers. However, in its [2016-2020 horizon report](#), the EU predicted that if crop-based biofuels were phased out to zero, whereas demand for some crops would decrease, demand for other crops would remain unchanged or even marginally increase for food and feed, with negligible negative effect.

Myth 3: Crop-based biofuels can be highly sustainable

The biofuel industry claims that biofuels need not drive land use change, and that instead the transport sector can rely on what they are calling ‘highly sustainable crop-based biofuels’. However, this delusional category of biofuels will displace agricultural land and drive deforestation in the developing world.

Further, according to a [European Parliament Research Service study](#) in 2015, 99% of biofuels used for road transport came directly from food and feed crops. Anyone who argues that the EU should meet a 7% biofuel in transport target whilst using such a delusional definition of sustainability is clearly stuck in Oz. We need policymakers to rouse themselves from the dream world that the biofuel lobby is luring them into, and start taking responsibility.

Paradigm shift needed

A well-intentioned idea, which sought to guarantee farmers’ incomes and replace fossil fuels, has had disastrous effects. Giving any further support to crop-based fuels would fly in the face of economic logic – and ethics – as the price of renewables such as wind and solar falls and battery technology races ahead. We need a total paradigm shift towards greater energy efficiency, smart grids matching supply and demand, and a new mobility paradigm based around active and public transport.

MEPs continue to be lured down the yellow brick road by the biofuel lobby, many perhaps hoping that for them the yellow may turn out to be gold. But the reality is that the idea of biofuels as a panacea for the green energy transition is as mythical as the Emerald City and, when it comes to a policy that protects Europe and the world's forests and productive farmland, most politicians are still dreaming.

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