Monocultures for biofuels:
Stop a climate, ecological and social catastrophe!

Amazon razed for soya

Oil palm nursery against burning rainforest on Borneo

Governments and corporations are subsidizing and promoting biofuels as 'green energy'. They want us to think it is part of the solution to climate change. At the moment, a mere 1.5% of the world's transport fuels come from agrofuels, but already millions of hectares of rainforest and other biodiversity hotspots are being destroyed. Farmland on which rural communities depend for their food is being transformed into monoculture plantations. Agrofuel policies support a new corporate alliance which includes big agri-business, oil companies, the biotech industry, car manufacturers and venture capitalists.

What are biofuels doing to the climate?

About one third of all greenhouse gas emissions come from the destruction of rainforests, other ecosystems, and from agriculture. On top of this, peat drainage accounts for even more carbon emissions than deforestation worldwide. Monoculture expansion is a leading cause for deforestation and peat destruction worldwide. Intensive agriculture emits large quantities of nitrous oxide, which is about 300 times as powerful a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide.

More rainforest destruction and intensive agriculture are one of the quickest ways to make climate change worse – even if biofuels cut down a bit on fossil fuel use. Ironically switching to biofuels doesn't really reduce our emissions much, because large amounts of fossil fuels go into making the fertilizers, running agricultural machinery, transporting feedstocks and fuels, and refining biofuels.

Experienced rainforest campaigners are warning that, within the next few years, biofuels could become the main reason for rainforest destruction worldwide.

Cutting down rainforests doesn't just add carbon to the atmosphere in the same way as burning coal or oil does: Many rainforests and other ecosystems have a 'tipping point'. This means we can degrade them so far and then they could collapse suddenly and completely – including the Amazon, which could be pushed into a cycle of mega-fires and desertification. Peat drainage in South-east Asia has turned one of the biggest carbon sinks on earth into one of the greatest sources of emissions. Indonesia is already the world's third biggest emitter of carbon dioxide. Nearly all their emissions come from peat drainage, deforestation and fires. Indonesia is now draining the remaining peat, destroying much of what remains of its rainforests. It is turning them into vast oil palm plantations for biodiesel – all in the name of 'green energy'.

Fuelling hunger

"The grain required to fill a 25-gallon SUV gas tank with ethanol will feed one person for a year." (Lester Brown, Director of the Earth Policy Institute).
In the last year, global food prices have gone up by 75% and the price of wheat has more than doubled. The World Bank estimates that 100 million more people are going hungry as a result, and food prices continue to rise. 100 million tonnes of grain were burnt for ethanol last year, and vast areas of land used for producing food are turned into plantations for growing fuel instead. Europe, including the UK, is investing heavily in wheat ethanol refineries which will further push up food prices. Most analysts agree that agrofuels are an important cause of food price rises, though not the only one.

Voices from the global South

"The only goal [of agrofuels] is to maintain current patterns of consumption in the First World and high rates of profit for multinational corporations." (MST, the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement)

"We demand a worldwide moratorium on agro-fuels monocultures and the international trade in agro-fuels, including the trade in carbon credits. We need a moratorium to evaluate the potential impact and the dangers of this market. We denounce that we are victims of the adverse impacts of industrialized monocultures." (Farmers' organizations and NGOs in Paraguay)

"It is a push by industry to make another scramble for Africa, grab the land and continue with business as usual. The industrial bio-energy push to do increased bio-energy demand will be nothing other than an effort at extending the frontiers of neo-colonialism in its continued march on the back of the fabled market forces" (Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria)

What about 'sustainable biofuels'?

We can get a very small amount of energy from waste-vegetable oil, biogas from landfill or manure – and that's something to be supported. But it's not enough to reduce our carbon emissions by much. Let's call that fuels from waste, as opposed to 'agro-fuels'.

Some Western NGOs want to certify 'sustainable' soya and palm oil that is not linked to deforestation. Many communities and NGOs in the South deeply resent this, because vast monocultures for export are anything but sustainable!

And there is another problem: Deforestation rates go up when the price for soya, sugar cane and palm oil goes up – no matter where Britain gets its biofuels. Even if we were to only burn more rapeseed oil, wheat or corn, we'd still be driving up food prices across the board, and helping to trash rainforests.

This is why over 150 groups from North and South have called for a moratorium on EU incentives for agrofuels, EU imports of agrofuels and EU agroenergy monocultures.

What you can do

- Support the call for a moratorium – go to www.econexus.info/biofuels.html for details.
- Take part in Biofuelwatch email actions – go to www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/alerts/php or email us to sign up to regular action alerts. You can also sign up to regular news on biofuel impacts.
- Email us to find out how you can get more involved in the campaign.
- Campaign locally against biofuels from large-scale monocultures – including from imports. Contact us for more information.