Environmental groups condemn IPCC call for large scale biofuels as a climate disaster in the making, 4th May 2007

The IPCC Assessment Report Four has made a compelling case on what global warming means to the planet this century. It is the IPCC's strongest warning yet that drastic cuts in carbon emissions are vital if we are to avoid a catastrophic acceleration of climate change. Environmental groups are, however, deeply concerned that the IPCC's Summary for Policy Makers on climate mitigation, released earlier today, includes a recommendation for large-scale expansion of biofuels from monocultures, including from GM crops, even though monoculture expansion is a driving force behind the destruction of rainforests and other carbon sinks and reservoirs, thus accelerating climate change. The IPCC also recommend the expansion of large-scale agroforestry monoculture plantations. These plantations, which will include GM trees, are similarly linked to ecosystem destruction. Monoculture expansion is a major threat to the livelihoods and food sovereignty of communities many of which are already bearing the brunt of climate change disasters caused largely by the fossil fuel emissions of industrialised countries.

Almuth Ernsting of Biofuelwatch stated: "It is already clear that the burgeoning demand for biofuels that has been created to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is actually increasing them by deforestation in the tropics and accelerating climate change. So far, only 1% of global transport fuel comes from biofuels, yet already biofuels cause steep rises in grain and vegetable oil prices, threatening the food security of poor people and spurring agricultural expansion into forests and grasslands, on which we depend for a stable climate".

The IPCC recommend second generation GM biofuels, which are widely believed to be at least 10-15 years away from commercialisation. There are serious concerns about the risks involved in technologies which will rely heavily on GM microbes and fungi for the refining process, as well as GM crops and trees.

Mayer Hillman, senior fellow emeritus at Policy Studies Institute said: "There is an inherent and acutely serious problem within the report. On the one hand, it leaves us in no doubt to how vital conservation of the planet's ecosystems and carbon sinks are to averting the worst predictions made in the previous sections of the report. On the other, it proposes the large scale use of the biosphere to satisfy demand in the transport and energy sectors."

Simone Lovera, managing coordinator of the Global Forest Coalition, a worldwide coalition of NGOs and Indigenous Peoples Organizations added: "It is difficult to see how an emphasis on protecting rainforests and curbing deforestation is compatible with using biofuels as a solution to climate change when there are no policy instruments that guarantee biofuel expansion without accelerating deforestation."

The IPCC report would appear to suggest that the climate can be stabilised at a safe level without reducing growth. The signatories to the press release believe that only large-scale reductions in energy use in the industrial nations, together with investment in sustainable forms of renewable energy, such as wind and solar power, can avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

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Notes to Editors:

1. For details of the signatory organisations see:

Global Forest Coalition: www.wrm.org.uy/gfc ; Biofuelwatch:

www.biofuelwatch.org.uk; Global Justice Ecology Project:
www.globaljusticeecology.org ; Grupo de Reflexion Rural:
www.grr.org.ar ; Rettet den Regenwald e.V.: www.regenwald.org ;
Econexus: www.econexus.info; Munlochy Vigil:
www.munlochygmvigil.org.uk ; Noah: www.noah.dk/english.html ;
Corporate Europe Observatory: www.corporateeurope.org ; Gaia Foundation: http://www.gaiafoundation.org/

2. Indonesia's biofuel plans, are set to expand Palm Oil production 43-fold [tinyurl.com/33lb7r] and threaten most of that country's remaining rainforests and peatlands. If those plans are implemented, up to 50 billion tonnes of carbon are likely to be released into the atmosphere. This is the equivalent of over six years of global fossil fuel burning would clearly stand in the way of our common objective of stabilizing the climate before feedback mechanisms make this impossible.

3. NASA have shown that the rate of Amazon deforestation directly correlates with the world market price of soya [tinyurl.com/2pfga4]. That price is expected to rise sharply as demand for soya biodiesel grows. Soya expansion is linked to deforestation not just in the Amazon but also elsewhere, including the Pantanal, South America's Atlantic Forest and a portion of the Paranaense forest in Paraguay and North of Argentina. In Argentina, more than 500000 ht of forest land were converted to soya plantations between 1998 to 2002 [tinyurl.com/28upep].

4. Governments like the Brazilian government claim that they will only expand on degraded lands. The Brazilian National Agro-energy Plan has qualified no less than 200 million hectares of Brazilian territory as "degraded" and thus suitable for the expansion of biofuel monocultures. However, most of these so-called "degraded" lands are either biologically rich dry forest or grassland ecosystems that form the livelihood basis of Indigenous Peoples and other local communities, or lands that are used for cattle ranching or small- scale subsistence farming. If these lands are taken over by biofuel plantations, cattle ranches and small farms will be forced to move further into the Amazon and Atlantic forests and other precious ecosystems, causing accelerated deforestation.

5. From The UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report:

"human actions are depleting Earth's natural capital, putting such strain on the environment that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted. At the same time, the assessment shows that with appropriate actions it is possible to reverse the degradation of many ecosystem services
over the next 50 years, but the changes in policy and practice required are substantial and not currently underway." Although individual ecosystem services have been assessed previously, the finding that 60% of a group of 24 ecosystem services examined by the MA are being degraded is the first comprehensive audit of the status of Earth's natural capital." http://www.maweb.org/en/Article.aspx?id=58

6. The main GM crops (soya, maize and oilseed rape) are already being used for biofuels, leading to competition between food/animal feed and fuel production, notably with maize in the US. There is strong evidence [tinyurl.com/35o36j] of the genetically modified RR soya undermining food sovereignty and security in Argentina and being
linked to accelerated deforestation and biodiversity losses, including in the Gran Chaco forest, which remained fairly intact prior to the advent of GM soya. GM soya depends on widespread use of pesticides, which encourages herbicide-resistant weeds. For further information about the negative impacts of GM crops, including cross pollination and GM contamination, see www.econexus.info and www.gmfreeze.org .

7. The US Department of Energy website [tinyurl.com/2phn7z] details the fundamental barriers to producing cellulosic ethanol which yields
more energy than is used in the refining process. It is not known whether those barriers can ever be overcome. The aim of cellulosic ethanol research is to create GM plants with reduced lignin, and to create enzymes through GM technologies which can effectively break down cellulose and hemicellulose, fundamental building blocks of plants, on which all higher life forms depend. No risk assessment has ever been carried out. For further information, see tinyurl.com/2vhzow .