biofuelwatch

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Press Release from Biofuelwatch and AirportWatch

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Thomson's inaugural biofuel flight condemned as self-seeking and irresponsible greenwash

- biojet flight sparks controversy as airline pleads for a bail-out on fuel costs-

Aviation and biofuel campaigners have condemned Thomson Airways' commercial UK biofuel flights, scheduled to begin on Thursday, 6th October, as dangerous greenwash. Thomson are the first company to launch commercial flights with biofuel blends in the UK.

Thomson's parent company, the TUI Group, is giving the strong impression that these biofuel flights are "green". Their publicity aims to persuade the travelling public, and the government, that these biofuel flights produce lower carbon emissions, and are part of a real effort by the company to produce less environmental damage.

Their 'biojet' launch comes despite growing awareness of the serious negative impact which Europe's demand for biofuels already has on forests and climate change, and mounting evidence that biofuel production raises food prices, causes hunger and triggers land-grabbing in the Global South.

Thomson is also using these flights as part of a concerted lobby effort to win more state support and subsidies for aviation, this time to pay for biofuels (1). Seeking a way to boost their profits, airlines must view state aid that helps protect against fuel cost rises an attractive prize, particularly when it can be dressed up as climate-friendly.

Thomson originally planned to launch biofuel flights on 28th July, mixing only biofuels from Used Cooking Oil and tallow with kerosene, but had to delay those plans because they could not source enough used chip fat. They have now conceded that they will have to also use virgin plant oil, initially from camelina from North America and babassu nuts from Brazil, refined in Louisiana. Biofuels from camelina and babassu palm nuts are both in very short supply, with camelina yields being low and unreliable (2). The company that is refining Thomson's biofuels states on their website that they are looking at soya and palm oil as 'suitable' future feedstocks (3). Both are key drivers of tropical deforestation. as well as driving up food prices.

Industrial biofuel production from babassu is aggravating long-standing social and land-conflicts in Brazil, where up to 400,000 women and their families depend on traditional babassu harvesting and media reports have warned that energy companies are curtailing the families' access to the trees, thus threatening their livelihoods (4).

Sarah Clayton from AirportWatch states: "Thomson Airways are using spurious claims about the merits of 'sustainable biofuels' to try and get the Government to grant yet more financial support and preferential treatment for the aviation industry. There is nothing

sustainable about competing with other biofuel markets for the obviously limited supplies of used cooking oil and tallow. This merely means that others, finding increased competition for supplies, will then simply use more palm and soya oil instead, thus causing more forests to be destroyed. And there is nothing sustainable about worsening existing land conflicts in Brazil so that companies like Thomson can keep expanding."

Rob Palgrave from Biofuelwatch adds: "The word 'sustainability' has been used by virtually every sector and every company investing in all types of biofuels, regardless of the effects on people, climate and the environment. Thomson Airways are pushing for more government support for biofuel just weeks after a report published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has confirmed the major role which biofuels are playing in food price rises and thus the growing number of people going hungry worldwide and called for an end to biofuel support across Europe and North America."

In July 2011, the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the FAO Committee on World Food Security confirmed that biofuels have played a significant role in the food price spike of 2007-2009 as well as in the current food price rises (5).

Last month, the Scientific Committee of the European Environment Agency challenged the EC to correct the accounting anomaly that means biofuels' greenhouse gas emissions are being under-estimated, saying the current methodology is based on an false assumption involving double counting of carbon savings "*and results in a serious accounting error*" (6)

The Thomson flight comes shortly after NOAA data (7) show that globally, August 2011 had the second hottest land temperatures of any August since records began, and 2010 had the joint warmest combined land and sea temperatures, equal to 2005. The industry and government recognise that aviation's greenhouse gas emissions need to be substantially cut, but a misguided, misinformed and damaging dash for biofuel is not the answer. The only way for aviation to sustainably cut greenhouse gases is to reduce flying.

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Notes:

(1) For a copy of TUI's Position paper on the introduction of biofuels into the Thomson Airways fleet, see www.aef.org.uk/downloads/TUI_(Thomson)_Aviation_Biofuels_Briefing_Paper%20Sept%202011.pdf . The paper states that amongst the objectives of the company's biofuel project are: "*To engage with the UK Government & EU Institutions to ensure (1) The co-development of a policy framework incentivising adoption of an aviation biojet infrastructure; (2) the roll out of effective incentives e.g. research and development funding, loan guarantees or other fiscal measures; (3) the development and negotiation of co-funding opportunities with key stakeholders to enable an increase in volume commitment in the longer term.*"

(2) Camelina is an oilseed crop which is currently grown on only a small scale in North America. According to US Government figures, the average yield for camelina in 2010 was 1029 lbs/acre, which is 1.15 tonnes/hectare www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/Publications/Press_Releases_Crops/camelina.pdf . By comparison, average rapeseed oils yields are 3 tonnes/hectare.

(3) See: http://dynamicfuelsllc.com/wp-news/frequently-ask-questions/. The biofuels which

Thomson Airways intend to use are sourced via a Dutch commercial partnership, SkyNRG but refined in Louisiana by Dynamic Fuels LLC.

(4) http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=104818 . Note that Tecbio, the biofuel company referred to in the article, has signed a cooperation agreement with Boeing who are partners in Thomson Airways' biofuel project and are thus the likely suppliers of the babassu nut oil.

(5) See: www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/hlpe/hlpe_documents/HLPE-price-volatility-and-food-security-report-July-2011.pdf

(6) http://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/governance/scientific-committee/sc-opinions/opinions-on-scientific-issues/sc-opinion-on-greenhouse-gas

(7) NOAA National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/

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