

BIG GREEN LIES

Biofuels and bioenergy worsen climate change, threaten forests, biodiversity and human health, and encourage land grabs

Industry and governments, under the guise of addressing climate change, are providing supports and massive cash flows (direct subsidies, tax breaks, etc.) to promote the use of living plants – wood, crops, grasses, algae, municipal waste, manure, sewage sludge and more) as a substitute for fossil fuels. They promote refining these materials into biofuels for transportation (agrofuels), as well as biochemicals/plastics and other “bioproducts” and burning them for bioelectricity.

Where will it all come from?

This ENORMOUS demand for crops, wood and other forms of “biomass” is resulting in expanding industrial monocultures, more GMO crops and trees, synthetic microbes*, deforestation and “land grabs” as investors cash in on these profitable new markets. According to a peer-reviewed study published in *Science*, putting a price on carbon emissions from fossil fuels while classing bioenergy as 'carbon neutral' is likely to lead to the loss of all natural forests, grasslands and most other ecosystems by 2065 (tinyurl.com/dyb64a3). And classing bioenergy as largely 'carbon-neutral' lies at the heart of most countries' renewable energy policies.

Bioelectricity: Burning wood for “renewable electricity” is very rapidly expanding and accounts for the bulk of growth in renewable energy in Europe and the US. The result: massive new demand and international trade in woodchips and pellets, shipped from all over the world to be burned. Burning wood for electricity is highly inefficient (most facilities operate around 25% efficiency, and require about 13,000 tons of wood per megawatt-year of electricity generated) It releases more CO₂ per unit of energy even than burning coal or natural gas upfront – as well as similar and in some cases higher levels of air pollution as burning coal (pollutants such as nitrogen dioxides, small particulates, dioxins and heavy metals linked to respiratory and heart disease and/or cancers and birth defects). The “carbon neutral” claim - that trees will regrow and re-absorb carbon released when they are burned is misleading: Trees can be burned in minutes, and yet take decades to regrow. Meanwhile we will dump more CO₂ into the atmosphere at a time when climate scientists are warning that global emissions must be reduced drastically in the next few years. Overharvesting of wood depletes nutrients and inhibits regrowth.

Biofuels including corn and sugar cane ethanol, soy and palm oil biodiesel, continue to expand, in spite of numerous studies demonstrating their failure to reduce emissions, the negative impacts on biodiversity and human rights, and their role in worsening hunger. In the EU, despite a large number of studies and scientific institutions warning that biofuel policies and targets ignore the all-important indirect impacts of biofuels and therefore make climate change worse, the Commission has recently decided to continue ignoring those impacts for at least another seven years, during which biofuel use is to rise significantly. Biofuels are increasingly used outside the road transport sector, too. Over the last six months, airlines have been allowed to blend up to 50% of plant-oil derived biofuels with kerosene and several have commenced or announced biofuel passenger flights. Palm oil in particular is being increasingly used for heat and electricity, especially in Germany, Italy and Hawaii. And the US military the single largest consumer of oil on the planet - is promoting the use of various biofuels for “energy security”.

Biochar (fine grained charcoal made from burning biomass), is being promoted as a future carbon offset, for example to “offset” the emissions from Canadian tar sands extraction, and also as a “climate geoengineering” technology. Yet there is little basis for assuming that biochar will provide any of the claimed benefits, and good reason to assume that massive new demand for plant material will worsen problems. Proponents have called for more than 550 million hectares of land to be converted to produce feedstock for biochar production. Whose land?

Land grabs and human rights violations are already underway as investors seek to profit from new markets, growing industrial monoculture tree plantations, genetically engineered crops and trees** to satisfy all these demands.

For more information:

- Biofuelwatch: <http://biofuelwatch.org.uk> (reports and resources on biofuels, bioelectricity, biochar)
- Global Forest Coalition: http://globalforestcoalition.org/?page_id=221
- ETC Group: <http://etcgroup.org> (reports: "The New Biomasters", and "Extreme Genetic Engineering" *on synthetic biology)
- World Rainforest Movement: www.wrm.org.uy (resources and news relating to agrofuels and monoculture tree plantations, including for bioenergy)
- Energy Justice Network: <http://energyjustice.org> (factsheets on biomass and other "dirty energy")
- Global Justice Ecology Project: <http://globaljusticeecology.org> (**Stop GE Trees Campaign)
- GRAIN: <http://www.grain.org> (see resources on land grabs: www.farmlandgrab.org and agrofuels)