ENI

Greed over Green

biofuelwatch

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Background

ENI, or Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (the national hydrocarbons agency), is a multinational energy and fuel company headquartered in Milan, Italy, and one of the largest players in the global petroleum market. It was founded in 1953 and listed on the Italian and New York stock exchanges in 1995, in a five-part government privatisation plan for the company. The Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance still retains a one third share, but other major shareholders include CDP S.p.A., Romano Minozzi and BlackRock.

In recent years, following a transition pledge in 2014, they have become a leader in the biofuel industry, producing large amounts of hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), a drop-in fuel made from vegetable oils and animal fats. ENI's biofuel unit alone could be worth up to €12.5 billion, and by 2035 they hope to have quintupled their biofuel production. This exceeds the targets of most other European fuel companies, and surpasses even the ambitions of the twenty-three countries that recently signed onto the wrongheaded 'Belém 4X' pledge at COP30. ENI has two biorefineries in Italy already, at Gela and Porto Marghera, Venice, and recently signed deals to convert their refineries at Livorno, Sannazzaro and Priolo to making biofuels. They use biofuels to greenwash their reputation and claim sustainability despite being an oil supermajor - in 2025, their fossil fuel arm brought in €6.6 billion, more than eleven times as much as their renewables and biofuels arm, which made €598 million.

The company hopes to exceed 5 million tonnes of biofuel refining capacity by 2030. The three new projects have a combined current/projected capacity of about 2.5 million. HVO is a refining technology used to make renewable diesel, aviation biofuels, alternative shipping bunker fuel, and naphtha. Refining HVO requires reacting feedstocks such as palm oil, tallow (slaughter house residues) or canola/rapeseed oil with hydrogen to produce a liquid hydrocarbon fuel with identical or similar properties as petroleum fuels. ENI's promotional materials state:

'Today our biorefineries are fed mostly by waste raw materials resulting from used cooking oil, animal fat and other biomass'

In fact, purchasing supposed waste feedstock opens them up to the risk of purchasing fraudulent feedstock materials (see more below), while terms like 'other

biomass' are noticeably vague and opaque, leaving wriggle room for the company to pivot between multiple feedstocks and avoid being linked to any one supply chain - an ideal way to avoid responsibility in the industry's abuses - a key strategy, given Eni's association with toxic commodities like palm oil.

On the international stage, ENI has been fined significant amounts for running a price-fixing syndicate on blended HVO with other fuel companies - crowding legitimate competition out of the market; and for misleading consumers as to the supposed 'sustainability' of products made from 15% palm oil and 85% petroleum. Most recently, NGOs Recommon and Greenpeace Italia have brought a legal case against ENI for its early knowledge of climate change and decision to continue pursuing oil extraction in order to maximise profit, despite being able to predict the resultant outsized emissions and their negative impact on people and planet. The case has been accepted by the Italian court of Cassation, but ENI has launched various attacks against their opponents, including threatening SLAPP lawsuits around Greenpeace's publications on the potential consequences of ENI's reckless business decision-making. The NGO's calculations estimate that 'ENI's 2022 greenhouse gas emissions could cause an estimated 27,000 temperature-related premature deaths before 2100.' ENI was also still dealing in Russian gas in 2024, despite the illegal invasion of Ukraine.

ENI's biofuel projects in Africa

In its forays into the biofuels industry, ENI has become well known for controversies and poor practice. Much of this has been exposed by investigations from Politico and Transport and Environment. Their industrial-scale ambitions to grow biofuel feedstocks like castor, croton and cotton in Kenya and the Republic of Congo is designed to serve Italian, rather than African, interests. It also functions as an attempt to diversify into non-food/feed crops that can be used for aviation fuel under EU targets - a move away from the toxic brand of the palm oil products that Eni currently relies upon (and has failed, despite promises, to phase out) - namely Palm Fatty Acid Distillate (PFAD) which is discussed below. The result of these endeavours, however, is impoverished farmers with weakened food security. The promise was of drought-

resistant crops that would grow on so-called marginal land and provide additional income for agrarian communities without competing with food crops, yet the reality has been very different. Among the charges laid at the corporation's door are displacing dietary staples, sucking up land that is not always as 'degraded' or 'abandoned' as they claim, providing poor or even negligible yields that fail to secure subsistence or income for farmers, and inadequate support with technology and methods for growers on the ground. African governments and global financial institutions are colluding with ENI, and it is the ordinary farmers who suffer the consequences, with communities in the Makueni and Nakuru regions of Kenya describing low pay, insect vulnerability, poor yields and space competition with the crops they grow for food. In the Congo, Eni has partnered with large companies like Agri Resources to accumulate land, dispossessing local people. Import data from Eurostat also demonstrates that minimal amounts of castor oil are even being sent to Italy - a mere 65.3 tonnes from Congo in 2025, and no listed amount from Kenya, though Italy did receive a more reasonable 6,659 tonnes of generic vegetable oil from Kenya in the same time period. These small amounts link to previous attempts to grow biofuels in Africa, such as the jatropha boom which saw huge land grabs, ending in a failure to produce any viable quantities of usable feedstock.

A dried-up castor field in Nakuru county, Kenya. Credit: Constanza Gambarini, SourceMaterial

How transparent are Eni's biofuel claims?

'We produce our biofuels primarily from waste raw materials such as used cooking oil and residues from the agri-food industry.'

So claims ENI. This is a common form of greenwashing practiced by biofuel producers, relying on sustainability credentials for materials that multiple exposés have shown to be endemically

fraudulent in order to hide the reality of emissions and social consequences from HVO. These fuels, largely derived from monoculture crops like oil palm, soy, rapeseed and other potential foodstuffs, contribute to huge emissions through deforestation, peatland loss and biodiversity collapse. Feedstock commodity producers consistently dispossess and outcompete indigenous communities and peasant farmers. ENI fails to acknowledge these problems, to which they are key contributors, instead promoting the industry-captured International Sustainability and Carbon Certification (ISCC) certification body, which routinely awards sustainability credentials to feedstock commodities like used cooking oil (UCO) and palm oil mill effluent (POME) without carrying out proper checks, despite the high risk of mislabelling that these products bring. In a recent investigation in Indonesia, employees of a company known to supply Eni with so-called 'waste' biofuels were arrested for fraudulently selling virgin vegetable oils. While there is no hard evidence that Eni was aware of the fraud, this points to wider verification problems in the supply chain, and the lack of accountability in a model of business that allows purchasers like Eni to remain at arms' length, avoiding legal complicity in endemic fraud.

Furthermore, in their promotional messaging ENI entirely glosses over the dangers of industrial hydrogen use - required to refine the HVO in a process they have trademarked as 'ecofining' - despite the risks of explosions and fires which could seriously injure or even kill refinery workers. They also seek to use obfuscating language, such as referring to feedstocks with the vague and all-encompassing definition 'biochar', evoking soil fertility and carbon sequestration despite this word's inappropriateness for this context and the very real uncertainties around biochar's environmental credentials as a source of carbon dioxide removal (CDR), given its driving effect on deforestation.

ENI is distributing its HVO products across Italy as a low carbon solution, including as climate beneficial shipping fuels at ports like Ravenna, despite these serious risks and embedded malpractices. New biorefineries and mills are being opened from Asia to Italy, as monocultures displace subsistence farms across the Global South, and they are planning to produce fuel for aviation as well as road and maritime transport.

Palm oil and Palm Fatty Acid Distillate (PFAD)

Palm oil is now well known as a deforestation driving commodity in the contexts of food and oleochemicals, but many are unaware that it is also among the most common feedstocks for biofuels. Driving deforestation, wetland drainage, habitat loss, the extinction of rare and charismatic fauna, and the impoverishment, dispossession and persecution of local indigenous and peasant farmer communities, an increase in demand for palm oil commodities as feedstock for the global biofuels industry will lead to a disastrous scale-up in its destructive impact. Due to pressure from civil society and NGOs, many governments and businesses are seeking to move away from palm oil, but this is often only in appearance, rather than in practice. Eni, for instance, has pledged to cease depending on palm oil as a biofuel feedstock, but instead of honouring this promise, it relies on loopholes, such as importing PFAD, a palm fraction with a rancid taste and higher fat content which Eni misleadingly describes as a 'waste'. Yet PFAD is a commodity that possesses an independent demand chain for various functions including cosmetics, toiletries, rubber and animal feed, and thus is a primary driver of deforestation just like virgin palm oil. The UK appropriately treats PFAD as a product just like crude palm oil. Eni has previously made overt statements of intent to eliminate it from its feedstock supply, but as of 2024 was still relying on PFAD as a feedstock for biofuel production.

Palm oil mill in Malaysia. Credit: Uwe Aranas via Creative Commons

Waste Oil Scandals

Many of the waste feedstocks involved in supplying Eni's biofuels, such as used cooking oil and palm oil methyl ester (POME), have also been implicated in sourcing scandals where it was revealed that supposed residues were in fact virgin vegetable oils. Some of this misconduct even led to arrests in Indonesia, but the issue goes far beyond known fraud cases.

There are major, longstanding discrepancies between the amounts of UCO and POME available in major export countries and the much higher amount of feedstock that recipient countries import as UCO and POME. This is not a case of simply needing more stringent sustainability standards - the entire industry is built on endemic misaccounting and abuses.

Conclusion

In ENI's biofuel expansion, what we find is not an oil company finally seeing the error of its ways and pivoting to sustainable business practices for the sake of present and future generations, but rather a cynical attempt by a damaging institution to lock in the infrastructure, assumptions, profit levels and modes of operating that characterise the status quo from which they benefit so greatly. Their pivot to biofuels is a brazen effort to ensure they remain lucrative and influential in a rapidly changing world, where energy demand and supply will be unpredictable and come from non-traditional sources, in the context of a public that is increasingly concerned about climate change. Despite the absolute necessity for near-term contraction in all the sectors for which Eni supplies biofuels if we are to meet our decarbonisation targets, due to insufficiently scaled extant technology for genuine emissions cuts. It also seems like a dead end and waste of time and resources to focus on internal combustion engine vehicles powered by biofuels when they are so much more inefficient, requiring so much more land, water and other resources, than electric vehicles charged with energy generated through solar PV.

Farmers can lose land and livelihood, consumers be misled and competitors disadvantaged, pollution and emissions can worsen, and as a result more people can die, but ENI still seeks to leverage biofuels to maintain its foothold in the energy market and in global geoeconomics, no matter the cost in lives, livelihoods and our future.

Further Reading

https://www.politico.eu/article/seeds-of-doubt-the-dark-side-of-enis-green-jet-fuel-promise/

https://www.transportenvironment.org/articles/from-farm-to-fuel-inside-enis-african-biofuels-gamble

Biofuelwatch provides information, advocacy and campaigning in relation to the climate, environmental, human rights and public health impacts of large-scale industrial bioenergy.