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## **International Biochar Conference Uses False Claims to Promote Dangerous Technology in the name of Climate Change Mitigation**

Joint Press Release by Global Forest Coalition, Biofuelwatch (UK) and Global Justice Ecology Project

Campaigners today warn that an international conference on biochar, which will be held in Newcastle, UK from 8 to 10 September, will be misleading governments and the public with claims that biochar - a by-product of second generation agrofuel production - can curb climate change and improve soil fertility.

The International Biochar Initiative (IBI), which is organising the conference, promotes the idea that disastrous climate change can be prevented if we use enormous amounts of biomass for bioenergy, obtain charcoal as a byproduct and use that charcoal as a fertilizer. They claim this is a "carbon negative" process, and that the charcoal improves soil fertility and carbon sequestration. Unfortunately, their claims are unfounded and they fail to account for the fact that vast areas of land would have to be turned over to monoculture plantations to produce enough biomass. [1]

From New Zealand, Sandy Gauntlett with the Pacific Indigenous Peoples Environmental Coalition and Global Forest Coalition warns: "Biochar proponents are speaking about enormous amounts of biomass, which will require hundreds of millions of hectares of land being converted worldwide, as well as removing large amounts of agricultural residues and forest produce which are essential for maintaining healthy soils and biodiversity. In the name of 'climate change' mitigation they want to greatly speed up agrofuel expansion, which is already a leading driver of deforestation, other ecosystem destruction and forced removal of indigenous peoples. This will accelerate global warming. [2] To suggest that any massive new demand for biomass plantations will help stem climate change is a very dangerous false solution".

Almuth Ernsting of Biofuelwatch adds: "The IBI board members are well aware that science does not back their claims. We were advised by the chair of the board, Professor Lehmann, that there are no long-term experiments to suggest that biochar actually sequesters any carbon in the ground or that it makes soil more fertile.[3] Yet this does not stop him and other board members from supporting unsubstantiated claims and calling for carbon credits for biochar."

Biochar proponents also claim that their technology will help rural communities by raising soil fertility and by giving farmers a new income source. However, companies investing in this technology are already taking out patents on biochar, and one of the firms represented at the conference, BEST Energies, proclaims on their website "We are well positioned to win the current land grab in next-generation fuels" [4], blatantly disregarding the human rights abuses that are occurring as a result of global expanded demand for biomass.

Dr. Rachel Smolker from Global Justice Ecology Project warns that this is yet another scheme for profiteering off of the crisis of climate change. The only ones who will benefit will be the plantation, forestry and bioenergy companies, while people are further displaced from their traditional lands. Amongst the first companies to have participated in biochar research are three Indonesian pulp and paper companies notorious for their destruction of rain forests and for illegally appropriating land. One of them is implicated in 31 killings since 1998." [5]

### **Contacts:**

In the UK: Almuth Ernsting, Biofuelwatch, +0044-1224-324797, mobile tel: +44-(0)7530-406572

In North America: Orin Langelle, media coordinator, Global Forest Coalition, office tel: +1-802-482-2689, mobile tel: +1.802.578.6980

In Paraguay: Dr Miguel Lovera, mobile tel: +595-971-201957 (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Italian)

### **Notes:**

[1] Biochar is charcoal which is a by-product of a form of bioenergy production called pyrolysis. This involves exposing biomass to high temperatures in the absence of oxygen. It produces mainly

bio-oil, which can be used for heat and power, for ship engines and also as a precursor to making synthetic biodiesel for cars. Biochar has been compared to ancient carbon rich soils in Amazonia, called terra preta, however nobody knows how those soils were created, nor whether or how they can be replicated. We do know that there are significant differences between those soils and modern biochar which is highly variable depending on how it is produced. Hence claims of its' effectiveness are based on the success and knowledge of indigenous Amazonians who disappeared thousands of years ago.

<http://www.css.cornell.edu/faculty/lehmann/publ/FrontiersEcolEnv%205.%20381-387,%202007%20Lehmann.pdf>

[2] Recent peer-reviewed studies by Timothy Searchinger et al ([tinyurl.com/2blteq](http://tinyurl.com/2blteq)) and by Fargione et al ([tinyurl.com/2dhfss](http://tinyurl.com/2dhfss)) show that all agrofuel production results in land-use change and that the carbon emissions from this will be far higher than any 'savings' from burning less fossil fuels over a period of decades and in many cases centuries.

[3] Email by Professor Lehmann to Biofuelwatch, 27th March 2008

[4] <http://www.bestenergies.com/companies/bestaustralia.html>

[5] The Indonesian pulp and paper companies PT Perhutani, PT Musi Hutan Persada and PT Tenjung Enim Lestari were involved in biochar studies ([tinyurl.com/6mn8hz](http://tinyurl.com/6mn8hz) and [tinyurl.com/6mfvqq](http://tinyurl.com/6mfvqq)). Two of the companies have been subject of strong national and international protest over deforestation and over evicting thousands of people, <http://www.dte.gn.apc.org/Ctel1.htm> ([tinyurl.com/5vdhtv](http://tinyurl.com/5vdhtv)) whilst the third, PT Perhutani has been implicated in serious human rights abuses, including killings ([tinyurl.com/6lvdj4](http://tinyurl.com/6lvdj4)).