

Press release:

For immediate release

Government must not pay vested interest group to provide evidence on dubious climate techno-fix

1st October 2009 - Environmental campaigners from ten organisations have today sent an Open Letter to Defra which expresses concerns about a potentially biased review of the evidence about biochar, i.e. fine-grained charcoal added to soils, a techno-fix promoted as a 'climate change solution'.(1)

The UK Biochar Research Centre (UKBRC) has been commissioned by Defra to review the evidence about biochar and the review could inform government policies. Biochar is being promoted as a way of sequestering carbon and thus countering global warming, despite a lack of evidence to back up those claims and growing evidence that large-scale production and use of charcoal in soils could actually make climate change worse. Both the United Nations Environment Programme and the Royal Society have urged caution, as have over 150 civil society organisations.(2)

Almuth Ernsting from Biofuelwatch says: "A large new demand for charcoal will put more pressure on forests, climate and communities, yet even at the small scale nobody can rule out that biochar could be negative for climate and soils. The government must apply the precautionary principle."

One of the UKBRC's official aims is to "investigate how biochar can be appropriately deployed in different socio-economic, cultural and policy contexts, including opportunities for inclusion in the Kyoto and post-Kyoto mechanisms for carbon trading".(3)

Helena Paul from Econexus states: "It is right for the government to commission research to find out what is known about different proposals, such as biochar. It is wrong for them to commission an institute which officially promotes the deployment of that technology prior to the carrying out of research. Government policy must not be informed/driven by vested interests."

Carolyn Marr from Down to Earth adds: "We support Indonesian communities whose land, livelihoods and forests are under attack from palm oil companies. Those companies could profit even more from charring their residues and selling them as biochar. A leading industry spokesman has already shown an interest. The UK government must consider the likely impacts in countries of the South."

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Notes:

- 1) The Open Letter can be found at http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/docs/letter_to_defra_280909.pdf
- 2) For statements by UNEP and the Royal Society, see www.unep.org/publications/search/pub_details_s.asp?ID=4027, www.unep.org/publications/search/pub_details_s.asp?ID=4027. The international declaration “Biochar: A new big threat to people, land and ecosystems, can be found at www.rainforest-rescue.org/news.php?id=1226 “
- 3) See www.geos.ed.ac.uk/scs/biochar/documents/ukbrc_factsheet.pdf