

Letter sent to the UK government by 29 UK and international organisations on 8th April 2009.

Dear Ms Kelly,

We are writing to you to urge you to suspend the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation and the introduction of mandatory biofuel blending, currently planned for 15th April. We also call on the UK government to oppose EU plans for new biofuel targets and incentives. This means both the 10% mandatory renewable energy target for transport in the draft Renewable Energy Directive, and the inclusion of biofuels in the draft new Fuel Quality Directive.

We find it particularly extraordinary that the government has decided to go forward with the RTFO when it has just decided to carry out a review of the indirect impacts of biofuels. Whatever the quality and independence of the review, this is serious policy incoherence.

Around 200 organisations from North and South have signed a call for an EU moratorium on agrofuels from large-scale monocultures, and there are separate calls for a US agrofuel moratorium and for an African agrofuel moratorium, as well as growing number of declarations from the Southern groups that are deeply concerned about the impact which agrofuel promotion by governments in the North is having on their communities, their food sovereignty and food security and their environment.

Below are some of the reasons why we believe that a moratorium is essential if we are to avoid severe and probably irreversible negative impacts on the climate, on communities in the global South, food security, biodiversity, soil and water.

Agrofuels are undermining food security and food sovereignty and are causing more hunger:

Global food prices have risen by 75% since 2005, with prices for wheat, soya, oilseeds and maize now at record levels. Jean Ziegler, UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, stated earlier in March that an extra twelve million people are suffering from hunger and malnutrition than a year ago, and that higher food prices are causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people (tinyurl.com/3yqoeb). The World Food Programme have launched an unprecedented emergency call for additional funding, warning that they will have to ration food aid otherwise. Together with the Government of Afghanistan, they have appealed for food aid for an additional 2.55 million people in Afghanistan due to rising wheat prices.

Whilst agrofuels are not the only reason behind rising food prices, the World Food Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the OECD, and the International Food Policy Research Institute, and also the government's Chief Science Advisor, Professor Beddington have all confirmed that biofuels play a significant role. At the same time as global food prices are rising, food sovereignty is being undermined and land on which communities in the global South depend for their livelihood is being turned over to agrofuel plantations, with the Indian government, for example, planning to convert 11 million hectares of what are mainly community lands to jatropha plantations.

Agrofuels worsen land conflicts, rural poverty and the displacement of rural populations:

Tens of millions of hectares of land worldwide are being turned into agrofuel monocultures. In Argentina and Paraguay, around 200,000 and 100,000 rural families respectively have already lost their land to soya plantations. In both countries, the soya industry is now rapidly expanding due to the new and fast-growing demand from biofuels, particularly in Europe (www.lasojamata.org/).

In Tanzania, thousands of farmers growing maize and rice are being evicted for sugar ethanol and jatropha biodiesel plantations, including plantations by at least one UK company (Sun Biofuels Plc).

A recent report by Friends of the Earth, Sawit Watch and LifeMosaic has provided evidence of violent tactics being used by oil palm companies to take land from indigenous communities with the collusion of government authorities, and of families losing their ability to sustain themselves and being forced into debt,

severe poverty, and poor working conditions, as well as being exposed to pollution from agro-chemicals and from the processing of palm oil (tinyurl.com/ysxg8q).

Agrofuels accelerate global warming:

Two recent studies by Searchinger et al (tinyurl.com/2blteq) and by Fargione et al (tinyurl.com/2nkx7n) show that, once all direct and indirect land use change emissions are taken into account, agrofuels are linked to 17-420 times more carbon dioxide emissions than any greenhouse gas savings from using less fossil fuels. Even the conversion of land previously taken out of agricultural production in temperate zones (such as European set-asides) results in a strongly negative carbon balance for biofuels.

As commodity prices rise, tropical deforestation is accelerating, threatening the release of vast amounts of carbon and a major disruption to regional and global rainfall cycles. In DR Congo, for example, contracts have been signed to establish the first three million hectares of oil palm plantations, despite the experience from other countries that oil palm companies routinely profit from clearcutting forests and selling the timber before establishing plantations.

No credible proposals for safeguards:

The RTFO introduces no 'sustainability standards' until 2011. By that time much of the damage will already have been done! Standards to be introduced in 2011 have been described by the Environmental Audit Committee as "unlikely to prevent environmental damage from biofuels". We agree with that statement and would add that catastrophic social impacts are also unlikely to be avoided through such standards. Rising food prices, ecosystem destruction and accelerated global warming are commonly indirect impacts, triggered by rising commodity prices and an overall increase in monocultures. No credible proposal exists as to how 'sustainability standards' could prevent such indirect impacts. Furthermore, communities in the global South which are most directly affected by agrofuel production have not been asked whether they wish their land to be used to grow fuel for the UK and other countries in the North, and a growing number of civil society organisations have clearly stated that they reject such policies on principle. We therefore hope that you will agree to suspend the RTFO and call on the government to oppose EU biofuel targets and incentives.

Yours sincerely,