

Current biofuels policies are unethical, says UK report

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Current UK and European policies on biofuels encourage unethical practices, says a report by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics today following an 18-month inquiry. Policies such as the European Renewable Energy Directive are particularly weak when it comes to protecting the environment, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and avoiding human rights violations in developing countries. They also include few incentives for the development of new biofuel technologies that could help avoid these problems.

"Biofuels are one of the only renewable alternatives we have for [transport fuels](#) such as petrol and diesel, but current policies and targets that encourage their uptake have backfired badly," said Professor Joyce Tait, who led the inquiry. "The rapid expansion of biofuels production in the developing world has led to problems such as [deforestation](#) and the displacement of indigenous people. We want a more sophisticated strategy that considers the wider consequences of biofuel production."

"Researchers are developing new types of biofuels that need less land, produce fewer greenhouse gases and do not compete with food, but commercial-scale production is many years away," said Professor Ottoline Leyser, one of the authors of the report. "The government should do more to encourage research into these more ethical types of biofuels."

In its report 'Biofuels: ethical issues', the Nuffield Council recommends that there should be a set of overarching ethical conditions for all

biofuels produced in and imported into Europe, including:

1. Biofuels development should not be at the expense of human rights
2. Biofuels should be environmentally sustainable
3. Biofuels should contribute to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
4. Biofuels should adhere to fair trade principles
5. Costs and benefits of biofuels should be distributed in an equitable way

"These ethical conditions should be enforced through a certification scheme – a bit like the Fair Trade scheme for cocoa and coffee," said Professor Tait. "This would create a market for environmentally sustainable and 'human rights friendly' biofuels."

"We appreciate the difficulties in applying firm ethical principles in the real world, but existing biofuels policy is failing. We can set the standard in Europe and encourage the rest of the world to follow suit. This is a global problem that needs a global solution."

Current biofuels

The two main transport biofuels currently in use are bioethanol, made from maize and sugar cane, and biodiesel, made from palm and rape seed oil. The European Renewable Energy Directive states that 10% of transport fuel must come from renewable sources by 2020. In the UK, 5% of transport fuel must come from renewable sources by 2013. To

meet these targets, biofuels are being imported from countries that do not all have responsible or enforceable policies on climate change or human rights. The targets also rely on voluntary agreements on environmental sustainability for biofuels produced outside the EU.

New biofuels

Researchers are developing technologies that enable all of the plant to be used in biofuel production, meaning less waste and higher energy outputs. Another avenue of research is using algae to produce biofuels that do not compete for agricultural land, but this is mostly at the experimental stage.

"There is a duty to develop biofuels that comply with our ethical principles," said Professor Tait. "Governments should incentivise the development of new types of biofuels that need less land and produce fewer greenhouse gases, for example by creating research funding programmes or encouraging public-private partnerships."

The wider picture

"Tackling climate change whilst providing energy and fuel for a growing global population presents us with a formidable challenge," said Professor Tait. "We have developed these ethical principles with biofuels in mind, but we urge policy makers to use them as a checklist for all new technologies. Biofuels, if produced in an ethical way, have great potential to contribute to the energy mix, but they alone cannot solve our problems."

Biofuels currently make up 3% of UK road transport fuel and this is expected to increase. Most of the UK's biofuel comes from Argentina, Brazil and Europe. Last year, only a third met the environmental

standards set by the UK's Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation.

Promising initiative

Recent amendments to European policy have attempted to raise the social and environmental standards of biofuels, but these are not widely enforced outside Europe. A promising global initiative is the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels. This independent organisation has set out voluntary standards for biofuels covering human rights, [greenhouse gas emissions](#), conservation, and use of natural resources across the entire lifecycle of the [biofuel](#).

"The standards set out by the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels provide a good starting point for the international certification scheme for biofuels we are recommending," said Professor Tait.

More information: Copies of the report Biofuels: ethical issues will be available to download from the Council's website www.nuffieldbioethics.org

Provided by Nuffield Council on Bioethics

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