Leaked documents indicate EU looking to reclassify carbon emissions from biofuels

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Oil palm plantation on the slopes of Mt. Cameroon. Image: Wikipedia.

(PhysOrg.com) -- In order to wean themselves from their dependence on oil derived from fossil fuels, many countries, consortiums, and other groups have put incentives in place for the growing of plants that could be used to create biofuels. Brazil is one example, they have converted much of their infrastructure to using fuel made from sugar cane. The United States is another example; the government offered subsidies and tax advantages for farmers who grow corn, to promote the production of ethanol. In Europe, the EU back in 2009 enacted laws that stipulated that renewable energy sources such as those derived from plants should make up a minimum of 10% of all fuels used for transportation purposes in the Eurozone by 2020. Unfortunately, it appears, according to a leaked report obtained by EurActiv, that the EU believes initial environmental impact reports were flawed and as a result the governing body is about to

revise its estimates regarding the true environmental impact; a move that could have a major implications regarding the future of biofuel use in Europe.

The problem with suddenly switching from one energy source to another is it's tricky to see in advance what sorts of incidental actions might occur. In the United States, for example, the sudden increase in land being used for corn production for use as a biofuel led to food price spikes all over the world. In Europe, the problem is when biofuels are made from palm oil, land that was once being used to grow food in countries such as in Malyasia, suddenly is converted to produce palm oil (because farmers can make more money) meaning new land must be made available for growing food. And that's where the environmental impact comes in. Cutting down forests to grow those food crops adds significantly to the carbon footprint of the biofuels made from palm oil. Such a scenario is known as an Indirect Land Use Change (ILUC).

Specifically, the report says, when ILUC is taken into account, biofuels made from palm oil, soybeans and rapeseed, actually produce more greenhouse gas emissions than do fossil fuels. To arrive at these findings, the EU uses an equation derived from a variety of factors to obtain a measurement based on grams of carbon dioxide produced per megajoule of energy. In the report, for example, palm oil is rated at 105g, whereas gasoline is less than 90g. At the top of the list is oil pulled from the tar sand pits in Canada (107g) likely one of the reasons President Obama recently nixed the pipeline that was supposed to ship it south through the United States.

While it's not yet known what impact this report will have on biofuel use in Europe, it's likely the EU will make some changes to the legislation passed just three years ago, tipping perhaps towards solar, wind or even nuclear power to address the ever growing energy needs of a thirsty European Union.