

Joint press release from: Biofuelwatch, Corporate Europe Observatory, Econexus, Grupo Reflexion Rural, NOAH (Friends of the Earth Denmark)

For immediate release

Sustainability Criteria and Certification of Biomass – greenwashing destruction in pursuit of profit

18th March 2008: A meeting is being held today at the European Commission to discuss a report by the Biomass Technology Group for DG Transport and Energy entitled: Sustainability Criteria and Certification Systems for Biomass Production.

The EU says that it seeks energy security and wants to fulfil EU obligations under the Kyoto Protocol. It asserts that biomass for energy can play a key role in this. It also acknowledges that while part of this biomass will be produced in the EU, another part will be produced outside, and concludes that “energy security” will arise from having a larger number of different suppliers than with fossil fuel. It has also made its 10% target for liquid biofuels (agrofuels) conditional on having certification in place.

The Biomass Technology Group asserts that the establishment of certification systems can be left to the market. It favours voluntary certification systems, saying that WTO difficulties can be avoided and other goals regarding environmental and social impacts can be achieved more readily under voluntary systems.

Current initiatives such as The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), The Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS) and the Better Sugarcane Initiative (BSI) are meant to form the basis of a credible system. However, the FSC has been criticised for being heavily dominated by economic interests, for certifying the completely unsustainable industrial logging of ancient forests and large monoculture tree plantations with severe social and environmental impacts. The Biomass Technology Group acknowledges that RTRS and BSI will not have a complete set of criteria and indicators ready for some time. The RTRS has provoked a lot of resistance in producer countries of soy and its plans for a big meeting in Buenos Aires in April 2008 are already drawing strong criticism from around the world. In case of the BSI it is entirely unclear what legitimacy this project would have to develop world-wide standards for sugar cane production. There are no criteria in place for crops already in use for agrofuels such as wheat, sugarbeet, rapeseed or sunflower.

Almuth Ernsting of Biofuelwatch says: “Certifying biomass production is always assumed to be possible. No-one ever seems to ask whether it really is feasible to develop a system that can address the issues. We do not believe that it is. We also consider that the push for agrofuels is an extremely dangerous development that threatens food sovereignty, smallscale agricultural systems, water, soil and forests. We believe that far from countering climate change they will increase it. They contribute to rising food prices, causing hunger. Certification cannot address these issues.”

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is regularly cited by governments and interest groups to block attempts to develop mandatory certification systems. It only allows voluntary systems under conditions of free competition and also only if no measures are taken to inhibit trade in non-certified goods. Furthermore it seems clear that while some environmental issues may be acceptable, social issues, labour standards and even human rights are inadmissible under WTO rules. This shows the true and perverse nature of the WTO, even preventing its members from setting standards for policy-promoted products.

The BTG report admits that developing criteria is challenging. It notes that if only the EU has standards, exporters will simply shift to markets that do not certify. It also admits (crucially) that certification cannot help to avoid indirect adverse effects, but proposes bilateral agreements as a solution to this problem..

Most dangerously, it recommends looking at the CDM as a model, where the producer country has to confirm that CDM projects contribute to sustainable development. There is already plenty of evidence to show that such a system is open to all kinds of abuse and is even worse than certification systems.

Helena Paul from Econexus comments: “It is plain that the EU hopes to use certification to reduce opposition to the development of agrofuels. This is not acceptable. We must not allow agribusiness, the car industry and big oil to dictate more fake solutions. We have to face the fact that we cannot continue with business as usual. We need radical energy efficiency. Above all, we need to consume less. This gives us a great opportunity to transform our societies and make them more sustainable for the future.”

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Notes

1. The report by the Biomass Technology Group for DG Tren: Sustainability Criteria and Certification Systems for Biomass Production was published in February 2008. More details can be found at www.btgworld.com. The company has been involved in the conversion of biomass to fuels for 25 years and has a research and development arm and a consultancy arm, which won the contract to produce this report in September 2007.
2. The Forest Stewardship Council was founded to promote “responsible stewardship of the world’s forests”. First discussed in 1990, it was founded in 1993 after a long process of discussion and the first certificate was granted in the same year. Details of its certification processes can be found at: http://www.fsc.org/en/about/about_fsc/certification
3. The idea of founding a Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil was first discussed in 2001 and the inaugural meeting took place in 2003. 47 organisations including producers, processors, consumer goods manufacturers, retailers, banks and NGOs had signed its statement of intent by the end of 2004.
4. The Round Table on Responsible Soy was founded in 2006. Its interim executive board consists of retailers, producers, NGOs and banks. Large companies that have become members in the last year include BP, Shell, Archer Daniels Midland, Carrefour and Cargill. A letter repudiating the Round Table’s upcoming meeting (April 2008) can be found at <http://www.lasojamata.org/?q=node/108>. The Round Table website can be found at <http://www.responsiblesoy.org/>
5. The Better Sugarcane Initiative includes retailers, investors, traders, producers and NGOs. It aims to develop principles, criteria and indicators for sugar production. Members include representatives from Tate and Lyle, Coca Cola, Cadbury Schweppes, Cargill, Bacardi Martini and Shell Downstream. More information at <http://www.betersugarcane.org/index.htm>