

3rd European Conference, Bruxelles, 19-20 April 2007

GMO Free Regions

Biodiversity and Rural Development

Biodiversity and rural development in a changing global agricultural commodity market – Biodiversity and energy plants

Ursula Vavrik, EEB policy director

Ladies and Gentlemen!

One might argue that using agricultural crops for fuel has indeed a number of attractions: every country with agricultural land can increase its independence from energy imports (many countries are dreaming aloud of becoming the bio-oil sheiks of tomorrow), farmers have more choice between different crops to grow and for which purpose, and if done properly, they can help a bit in the fight against climate change. However, the attractions should be evaluated according to their contributions to the two most crucial challenges facing the world today: combating climate change and maintaining functioning ecosystems through the preservation of biodiversity.

Most important here is that measures and efforts to address one of the challenges do not worsen or undermines efforts towards the other. However, with the current ‘gold rush’ for oil and sugar rich plants to produce fuel for energy, this is exactly what we are in serious risk of doing. The EU’s political decision to set mandatory targets for the consumption of plant fuels in the EU will increase the demand for the cheapest agricultural commodities that are available on the market today. This means that demand for soy, palm oil, corn and rapeseed will increase the expansion of the intensive agricultural systems that produce these crops into natural ecosystems. Especially because the demand for these crops for

existing use as food and feed is also likely to increase. Given the fact that for the preservation of the most important ecosystem services we need to halt the expansion of agricultural land this is very problematic.

This is not to say that not more use can be made of agricultural products for energy purposes. The production of biogas from sewage sludge and animal manure can create a win-win situation by producing gas and help solving a waste problem thereby reducing nitrates pollution. Also the advance of technologies to produce liquid fuels from cellulose materials brings promise of more efficiency and higher output of energy from the same amount of land.

However, the benefit and usefulness of all this is very doubtful. The reality is that GM crops only do well in an agricultural environment which does not produce crops in an energy efficient and biodiversity friendly way, with high inputs of pesticides and fertilizers. The challenge of producing energy from plants without harming biodiversity is already big enough. The use of GMOs as energy crops is only going to make this more difficult. Unintended pollution by GMOs is not controllable; co-existence measures cannot guarantee GMO free agricultural plantations. Recent studies show significant negative health effects.

What is the way forward then? Probably we need to carefully reflect upon whether the current framework conditions for markets are set in the right way that means for a market allowing for sustainable development. Ideally, market incentives should enhance food safety, food security, energy security, steer climate and biodiversity policy, promote extensive agriculture and organic farming, allow for GMO free regions, and guarantee reasonable prices for 'sustainable', environmentally friendly agricultural goods.

More specifically, the EEB believes that a mandatory target for agri-fuels remains questionable. EEB therefore rejects this mandatory target and is disappointed that it has been adopted by the Council. With respect to GM-crops, we see more negative than positive effects, in particular with regard to their low energy-efficiency, the probably irreversible effects on biodiversity clearly jeopardizing the EU goal to halt biodiversity loss by 2010, and the level of uncertainty regarding successful co-existence measures, and illegal or contaminated GM-imports. EEB therefore would like to express its rising concerns about the effects changing agricultural commodity market may have on the European rural development and calls upon all decision-makers to adopt policy measures that overcome those concerns and to respect that consumers want GM-free food and a GM-free local environment.