

CHECK OUT

CCJP

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Fuel or Food

Introduction: On the 15th April 2008, sixty countries backed by the World Bank and most UN bodies called for radical changes in world farming to avert increasing regional food shortages, escalating prices and growing environmental problems. Australia, along with the US, UK and Canada are not endorsing the report.

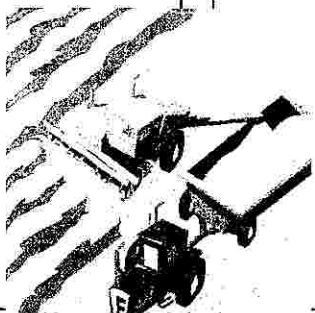
In response to our need to replace our dwindling fossil fuel supplies, at the same time continuing to meet our economic demand for energy supplies, many western governments, consumers and corporations have been calling for the replacement of fossil fuel consumption with biofuels. Biofuels such as ethanol (an alcohol distilled from the fermentation of grain or sugar) or fuels based on soy, corn or palm oil are seen as 'renewable' sources of energy.

Myth

There is not enough food to feed the world's population.

Reality

The facts show there is more than enough food for everyone on the planet – the problem is that we are not distributing it effectively or efficiently and we haven't ensured that communities themselves are food sufficient. The International Assessment of Agriculture Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) confirm this while stating that more than 800million people go hungry. The director of the UN World Food Program, Josette Sheeran, told the European Parliament: "The shift to biofuels production has diverted land out of the food chain".



Biofuels such as ethanol have been presented by alternative energy entrepreneurs and many environmentalists as a "clean, green" alternative to fossil fuels. But recently a growing chorus of scientists have warned of the dangers of biofuels.

On the face of it, biofuels are a preferable alternative to fossil fuels, particularly as they are "carbon-neutral". This means that when they are burned they do not release extra greenhouse gases from long-buried sources as does the burning of petroleum, coal and natural gas. The greenhouse gases that are released from biofuel use were already in the atmosphere before they were trapped in their crop plant.

But life is not so simple. One of the first criticisms of the use of biofuels was made by the London-based Institute of Science in Society (ISIS)

According to ISIS, not only do biofuels have many serious problems if applied on too large a scale, but these problems shed light on the real challenges before us if we want to create a sustainable society.

Biofuels rely on growing crops. For 30 years Brazil has been using large amounts of ethanol to fuel motor vehicles. This is relatively easy for Brazil, which has large amounts of sugar cane that is readily fermented into ethanol. On the other hand, in the US corn is also being developed as an ethanol source. This requires a much more complicated chemical procedure, requiring extra energy input.

Just growing these crops requires energy input — current farming practices rely on artificial fertilisers which are created using large amounts of electric power, generated by

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burning fossil fuels. Thus, biofuels indirectly add to the atmosphere's greenhouse gas levels. The process of refining and extracting biofuels also requires electricity generation.

"In 2003, the biologist Jeffrey Dukes calculated that the fossil fuels we burn in one year were made from organic matter 'containing ... more than 400 times the net primary productivity of the planet's current biota'. In plain English, this means that every year we use four centuries' worth of plants and animals."

If biofuels are to replace fossil fuels, this will require either a huge diversion of cropland from food production or clearing further areas of natural forest to make way for biofuel plantations.

Food security is intimately linked to national and international security. We are beginning to see headlines about food riots, food shortages and escalating food prices. There is a need to tackle the fundamental issues of food production and supply, ranging from a distorted trade regime to feeding a population that is set to mushroom from 7 billion to more than 9 billion in the next 30 years.

We are now pushing the limits of many of our economically important eco-systems that support pollinating insects, keep soils fertile and replenish the water supplies. Add to this the impacts of climate change.

We need to do things differently. If Australia can accelerate investment in its world-class scientific research base, including sustainable dry-land farming, it could not only contribute to solving current and future food crises, but also become a global agriculture leader prospering in a carbon-constrained world.

Then again - is our focus in our cropping food or fuel?

The recent UN sponsored summit in Rome on our current world food crisis received a report written by the International Institute for Environment and Development. The report stated that the rise of biofuels is not only adding to the global food crisis but also poses a risk for peasants who are pushed off their land to make way for energy crops. These "crimes against humanity" divert nutrition away from mouths into fuel tanks and compete for land that should be used to grow food."



What do we do?

We need to challenge our Australian Government to be part of the conversation around the shortage of food, particularly to the poorest of the world who are always hardest hit when shortages happen. UN experts have recognised Australian farmers are some of the best placed to continue to explore the production of food in low rainfall areas. Our farmers need to be supported with good science. We need to encourage the Government to fulfil an election promise to put more money into research. We need to be aware of our own use of food and fuel in acknowledgement of Australia's unique place in a world where, if something does not change, there will be an increase of those suffering starvation and conflict because of lack of adequate food supplies.

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