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**EUROPE:
'Biofuels Can Hurt the Poor'**

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BRUSSELS, Nov 6 (IPS) - A body tasked with shaping European Union policy on biofuels is dominated by companies with a vested interest in promoting this source of energy, environmentalists have claimed.

In early 2008, the European Biofuels Technology Platform will publish a report outlining a programme for greater research and development into how crops grown on farmland can be used to quench Europe's ever-growing thirst for transport fuels.

The Platform is the successor of the Biofuels Research Advisory Council (BIOFRAC), a group also set up at the European Commission's request. Last year BIOFRAC recommended that 25 percent of the Union's transport demands should be met by biofuels (also called agrofuels) by 2030.

Like BIOFRAC, the Platform is mainly comprised of industry lobbyists. Of the 125 people on its various working groups, just two belong to non-governmental organisations. The Platform's steering committee includes representatives of the Spanish oil and gas firm Repsol, the European Biodiesel Board and carmakers Volvo and Volkswagen.

Environmental campaigners are perturbed that the group is biased towards firms who either have a vested interest in biofuels or car companies who realise that the greater use of biofuels can provide them with an incentive not to develop more energy-efficient models.

"The Commission has ensured that the same companies that shaped the EU's vision on agrofuels through BIOFRAC are now implementing its recommendations and designing the agrofuels research and development agenda," Belen Balanya from Corporate Europe Observatory, which monitors the influence of business on EU law-makers, told IPS.

"There is a clear conflict of interest as these are corporations with a direct commercial interest in the development of agrofuels in the EU."

Earlier this year, EU governments agreed that biofuels will comprise one-tenth of all petrol and diesel used in the EU by 2010, albeit with the caveat that they should be produced in a 'sustainable' manner. The Commission is to formally propose criteria for limiting environmental damage caused by biofuels in December.

Over the past few months there have been a series of warnings that increasing the proportion of farmland devoted to biofuel cultivation is likely to be at the expense of producing food for the poor.

Jean Ziegler, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, has recently called for a five-year international moratorium on setting official targets for biofuel promotion.

Oxfam has also expressed unease about how poor farmers are being driven from the land to make way for biofuel plantations. In a recent report, it cited UN estimates that 60 million indigenous people are at risk of being uprooted.

Although Oxfam said that the establishment of biofuel cooperatives in Brazil has helped improve the livelihoods of poor farmers in that country, this has not been replicated in many other instances. In Colombia, paramilitaries have forced peasants from their land at gunpoint to plant oil palm trees. Palm oil is the main biofuel used in Europe.

And in Indonesia, indigenous people who were deprived of their land were given two-hectare plots as 'compensation'. While they were provided with credit to develop oil palms, they almost invariably ran up large debts during the eight-year period before the trees brought them any commercial gain. They then found they were obliged to sell to the companies to which they were indebted.

Oxfam queries, too, whether biofuels will actually bring any significant reduction to the EU's emission of greenhouse gases.

A study published in Science magazine suggests that nearly 40 percent of European cropland would need to be converted

to biofuels if the 10 percent goal agreed by the Union's governments is to be reached. As the target could not be met from existing arable land, grasslands and forests would have to be cleared.

The amount of carbon dioxide released from the requisite destruction would exceed any eventual saving of greenhouse gases brought by the use of biofuels in road transport, the study concludes.

"In the scramble to supply the EU and the rest of the world with biofuels, poor people are getting trampled on," said Oxfam spokesman Robert Bailey. "The EU proposals as they stand will exacerbate the problem. It is unacceptable that poor people in developing countries should bear the cost of questionable attempts to cut emissions in Europe."

Frauke Thies, an energy campaigner with Greenpeace, argued that environmentalists are "only marginally represented" in the European Biofuels Technology Platform.

She urged the Commission to "take seriously" the calls by EU governments that biofuels must be produced in a sustainable way.

Among the safeguards that are needed, she added, are that natural habitats will not be jeopardised, that biofuel production will not lead to the release of genetically modified organisms into the environment, that the right to food will not be compromised, and that genuine reductions of greenhouse gas emissions occur.

"There are valid concerns that must be taken into account by the European Commission in order for its strategy on biofuels to be credible," she said. (END/2007)