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Scrap biofuels targets and focus on improved public transport

Friends of the Earth's biofuels campaigner Kenneth Richter argues that biofuel targets are a distraction from tried-and-tested ways of reducing transport emissions. From [BusinessGreen](#), part of the [Guardian Environment Network](#)

Kenneth Richter for BusinessGreen

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Attitudes to biofuel crops such as rapeseed have changed as more research has been done into their impact on the environment and the emissions they create. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty

Antony Blakey alleges that groups such as Friends of the Earth are "vilifying" biofuels. In fact, Friends of the Earth is supportive of biofuels such as biodiesel made from recycled cooking oil that deliver real greenhouse gas savings without leading to biodiversity loss, social conflict and food-price rises for the world's poorest.

However, as part of a wide coalition of environmental and development groups including Oxfam, Action Aid, Greenpeace and the RSPB, Friends of the Earth is opposed to high EU and UK biofuel targets that cannot be met in a sustainable way. There is simply not enough recycled cooking oil to replace 10 per cent of Europe's fuel needs. More importantly, biofuel targets are a dangerous distraction from the real solutions to climate change.

Antony Blakey complains in his article that the UK government had "reduced its own biofuels targets, inevitably stunting the use of biofuel and the growth of the industry". The truth is that the UK has simply delayed its final 5 per cent target under the Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation (RTFO) from 2012 to 2014. Of greater concern is the looming EU target that by 2020 10 per cent of Europe's road transport fuel will come from "renewable sources" of energy. According to the UK government 95-100 per cent of this will be first-generation biofuels.

Shell has just signed a \$12bn (£7.7m) joint venture to form the biggest bioethanol producer in the world – hardly an indicator of a stunted industry.

Superseded

Mr Blakey quotes figures on greenhouse gas emissions reductions – 86 per cent for rape seed biodiesel compared with fossil fuels - drawn from a 2003 study that has long-since been superseded with new evidence.

The Renewable Fuels Agency (RFA) now works with a figure of 40 per cent emissions reductions for rape seed biodiesel, while the EU uses a value of 38 per cent. But even these figures are misleadingly high – in its Year One Report of the RTFO, the RFA admits that its calculations do not include one of the most important factors: emissions from indirect land use change.

The RFA states: "The Gallagher Review found that greenhouse gas emissions from indirect land-use change driven by the use of biofuels could be very large. If left unchecked, these could potentially cause an increase in overall carbon emissions rather than a reduction."

Indeed, modelling carried out for Friends of the Earth in April 2009 concluded that if emissions from indirect land use change were taken into account, the RTFO could have led to 1.3 million tons of extra greenhouse gas emissions - equivalent to putting an additional half a million cars on the road.

The RFA's report also revealed that currently only 9 per cent of biofuels used here is produced from UK feedstocks and this is unlikely to increase significantly. The Department for Transport estimates that by 2020, 45 per cent of Europe's biodiesel could come from Malaysian and Indonesian palm oil.

Orang-utans

Mr Blakey says, "Last time I checked, there were no wild orang-utans in Middlesbrough or King's Lynn." But if we continue to ignore the massive impact biofuels are having on rainforests overseas we might soon find Indonesia in much the same situation as Middlesbrough in that respect.

Mr Blakey's company, Ultra Green Group, stakes much of its hope on an unnamed biodiesel forest crop "that can be cultivated away from food production land and utilise unused and waste land

instead." This is reminiscent of jatropha, a biofuel "wonder crop" about which similar claims were made until it was shown that its yields are negligible on waste land and its expansion was refocused on valuable African agricultural land where it directly competes with food production.

Mr Blakey is right when he says that the time for talking is over - we need urgent action to tackle climate change. But biofuels are a distraction from the emissions reductions and fuel solutions. The billions spend by the EU and its Member States in support of biofuels every year would be far better spent on solutions that are cheaper, not environmentally damaging, and proven to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The Government must scrap biofuel targets – which will never be met without grave environmental consequences – and instead focus on greener cars and improved public transport, fast and affordable rail services, and incentives to get people cycling and walking.