



Environment committee backs compromise on cleaner biofuels

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MEPs and ministers moved a step closer on Tuesday to an agreement on plans to cap the production of traditional biofuels and accelerate the shift to alternative sources, such as certain types of waste and residues and new sources such as seaweed, with the environment committee's vote backing a deal struck by legislators. The plan aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions caused by the growing use of farm land for biofuel crops.

"It was a very challenging file and we didn't achieve all we wanted to achieve. There are very different capabilities and approaches between Member states on advanced biofuels, some are willing to go forward more than others, as well as a very profound disagreement on ILUC factors," said the lead MEP, Nils Torvalds (ALDE, FI), after the committee endorsed the outcome of the negotiations with the Latvian Presidency by 51 votes to 12, with 1 abstention.

First-generation biofuels under surveillance

Current legislation requires EU member states to ensure that renewable energy accounts for at least 10% of energy consumption in transport by 2020. The compromise approved today states that first-generation biofuels (from crops grown on agricultural land) should account for up to 7% of final energy consumption in transport by 2020.

Fuel suppliers will report the estimated level of emissions caused by freeing up more land to grow food crops needed when land has been switched to biofuel crop production, known as indirect land-use change (ILUC) to EU countries and the Commission. The Commission will then report and publish data about these ILUC-related emissions. Later, the Commission is expected to report back to the EP and the Council, based on best available science, on the scope for including ILUC emission factors in the existing sustainability criteria.

Boosting advanced biofuels

EU member states will have to set a national target, no later than 18 months after the directive enters into force, for advanced biofuels, e.g. sourced from certain types of waste and residues and new sources such as seaweed. The draft legislation sets an indicative target of 0.5% for the share of energy to be produced from advanced biofuels as a percentage of the energy derived from renewable sources in all forms of transport by 2020. Member states may set a lower target on certain grounds, such as a limited potential for production, technical or climatic constraints, or the existence of national policies that already allocate commensurate funding to incentives for energy efficiency and electric transport.

Next steps

The text of the agreement will be put to a vote by the full House during the 27-30 April plenary session in Strasbourg. Member states will have to enact the legislation by 2017.

Press release

Background

Using farmland to produce biofuel crops reduces the area available for food crops. This adds to pressure to free up more land, e.g. through deforestation, to grow more food – a process known as indirect land use change (ILUC). But deforestation in itself increases greenhouse gas emissions, which may cancel out part or in some cases even all of the beneficial effects of using biofuels.

Parliament called as long ago as 2008 for the ILUC factor to be taken into account in EU biofuels policy, while land-based biofuels have received up to €10 billion per year in public subsidies.

Links:

- Profile: Nils Torvalds (ALDE, FI):
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/114268/NILS_TORVALDS_home.html
- Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/envi/home.html>
- EbS news: biofuels: <http://audiovisual.europarl.europa.eu/Assetdetail.aspx?ref=I101465>

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