Limit EU use of conventional biofuels - Parliament committee

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Food crop-based biofuels should make up no more than 6.5% of the EU's energy mix for transport in 2020 and mandatory targets for advanced biofuels are needed, says the European Parliament's industry, research and energy committee.

The committee (ComItre) today adopted its position on the proposed revision of EU policy on biofuels, as governments, MEPs and stakeholders continue to clash on how to ensure their use brings fewer emissions than fossil fuels - both directly and indirectly.

How to proceed is the subject of fierce debate, with a UN food expert this week calling on the EU to limit not only food-crop based biofuels but all land-based biofuels that compete with food production in the use of land and water.

The European Commission has proposed a 5% cap on the share of 'conventional' biofuels - those made from cereal and other starch-rich crops, sugar and oil crops - in the EU's transport fuel mix by 2020.

The aim is to mitigate the impact of 'indirect land use change' (ILUC), the displacement of food production to other areas due to EU demand for biofuel - largely in developing countries - resulting in indirect greenhouse gas emissions.

Parliament proposals

ComItre, the 'associate' committee on the plan, today called for the cap to rise to 6.5% but also wants 'advanced' biofuels - those produced from waste, algae and other sources not directly competing with food and feed crops - to make up a greater share of the energy mix.

The MEPS propose minimum targets of 0.5% in 2016, 2.5% in 2020 and 4% in 2025 for these fuel sources, provided they meet sustainability criteria, as they bring more emissions savings.

With the accuracy of current ILUC calculation methods in question, the committee says that if a reliable model is to be found, the Commission should propose requiring suppliers to report on the estimated ILUC emissions of their biofuels from September 2016.

European renewable ethanol association ePURE welcomed the call for targets for advanced biofuels, saying it "reflects the growing appreciation among MEPs across the political spectrum of the important role renewable ethanol has to play in Europe's fuel mix".

Limit on all land-based fuels?

Yet while ComItre's amendments will be put to a Parliament plenary vote, the environment committee (ComEnvi) is the lead committee and will adopt its own position on July 10 - with different ideas on the table.

ComEnvi is now likely to back the 5% cap but wants this to include 'second-generation' biofuels, i.e. those made from non-food crops and/or ligno-cellulosic biomass, such as jatropha, to help mitigate ILUC.

A 3% target for 'third-generation' biofuels - those from non-land sources such as algae, so not competing with food crops - is also being discussed, rapporteur Corinne Le Page told Agra Europe yesterday.

French MEP Le Page also wants ComEnvi to call for ILUC calculations to be a mandatory part of the sustainability criteria from 2018, with suppliers only required to 'report' on the estimations in the meantime.

"That will give us time to assess how ILUC is operating and to update the values in function of developments in third countries," said Liberal Democrat (ALDE) member Le Page.

The Parliament as a whole should adopt its position in the autumn, with negotiations with member states then required. Governments are themselves highly divided on the proposals, with some in favour of the cap on conventional biofuels but others against.

The Irish Presidency had suggested a 5% limit only on oil crops, but the alternative of a sub-target for advanced fuels is more likely to get support in the Council, Agra Europe understands.

Food security warnings

As intense lobbying continues from industry and NGOs alike, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, this week reiterated what he sees as the right way forward.
As well as a cap on all land-based biofuels, the academic called for mandatory ILUC accounting and more EU support for the development of third-generation sources such as algae.

Biofuel production in developing countries should also be made to comply with the UN guidelines on responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests adopted in May last year, he told journalists in Brussels.

"No biofuels imported into the EU should arise from investments robbing local communities of the land on which they depend," he stated - stressing that EU and US demand for liquid biofuels increases the pressure on land and water in the global south.

De Schutter acknowledged the lack of consensus on an ILUC calculation model but argued that "all evidence points to the importance of this factor" and urged the EU to use it and "improve it along the way".

If a "product life-cycle approach" is used - taking all crop processing and ILUC into account - then the emissions savings of some biofuels compared to fossil fuels are "significantly less" than initially hoped and in some cases actually negative, he added.