



PRESS RELEASE: embargoed until 14.30 7 June

Fuelling extinction? Unsustainable biofuels threaten the environment

(Brussels, 7 June, 2006) – On the eve of a key meeting of European energy ministers to discuss the EU's biofuels strategy, three of Europe's leading environmental organisations have warned that EU policies promoting biofuels may cause more environmental damage than the conventional fuels they are designed to replace if important environmental safeguards are not put in place.

At the conference, *A sustainable path for biofuels in the EU*, organised by EEB, BirdLife International and Transport and Environment (T&E), the three organisations called on the European Commission to introduce sustainability safeguards as part of the ongoing revision of the Biofuels Directive. Participants, including Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas, heard that without safeguards, greenhouse gas (GHG) savings will be negligible, biodiversity will be harmed, and ultimately the public could reject biofuels if they are not seen to be a credible environmental alternative to fossil fuels.

According to an EU-sponsored study, meeting the EU's target of replacing 5.75% of fossil fuels with biofuels would consume 14-27% of EU agricultural land. It is clear that this target cannot be met by domestically-produced biofuels alone, and the reliance on imports of palm oil and sugar-cane-derived fuels only raises the stakes of what's at risk.

"Climate change and biodiversity loss are among our most pressing challenges," said John Hontelez, EEB Secretary General. "We must urgently reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change. But we must tackle climate change and biodiversity loss in tandem. Biofuels are only part of the solution. Unless we produce biofuels sustainably, we'll end up with more energy-intensive and environmentally damaging farming practices and hasten the degradation of our ecosystems."

Ariel Brunner, Policy Officer at BirdLife International, said "Europe must act now or biofuels could spell disaster for biodiversity worldwide. Already we are seeing European wildlife affected by biofuel production. The little bustard in France and the red kite in Germany are both examples of species being put in danger by the unmanaged conversion of land into biofuels production. The problems get even more serious when we consider the prospect of imports that are produced at the expense of the rainforest."

Aat Peterse, Policy Officer at Transport and Environment (T&E) said, "For transport, improving energy efficiency of vehicles should be the first priority. If biofuels are to be part of the energy solution, the EU must ensure that those produced by clearing rainforests and protected habitats will never be sold in Europe."

Notes to editors:-

- The Energy Council meets on 8-9 June and will be discussing and publishing the Council's conclusions on the EU's 'Biomass Action Plan' published last December.
- There are many risks to biodiversity and the environment which result from the growing European biofuel market:
 - The displacement of land-uses that are important to biodiversity. The most immediate risk is losing agricultural 'set-aside' land. European farmers are required to set aside some of their land and put it out of production. While not an environmental measure, set-aside has had huge benefits to wildlife and has become a critical part of the European farmed landscape, acting as a refuge for farmland biodiversity.
 - The harmful impact of energy crop 'monocultures' (concentrated growth of a single crop over wide areas), excluding the plants and animals which would otherwise contribute to the ecosystem, making fields ecological semi-deserts. Intensifying the production of energy crops, including new types like miscanthus (elephant grass), also increases use of fertilisers, energy and pesticides, which further damage the environment and contribute to climate change. Biofuel growth can aggravate existing threats to biodiversity.
 - Losing natural habitats of global importance for wildlife and carbon storage, such as the Indonesian rainforest and the Brazilian Cerrado, through importing biofuel feedstocks. Cultivating vast plantations of palm oil, sugarcane and soy may also cause soil erosion, harm water quality and bring social problems, such as displacing native people and small farmers.
- The three environmental organisations believe the solution is to ensure that only the right kind of biofuels, those produced sustainably which genuinely offer major greenhouse gas benefits, are eligible for public support and count towards public targets, such as the EU target of replacing 5.75% of transport fuels with biofuels by 2010. A mandatory certification system for biofuels must ensure minimum production standards are met and confirm eligibility for public support.
- Biofuels are only one of many technologies which reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Their role is restricted by limited available land and competing land uses. Biofuel development must therefore be part of a broader energy policy focusing on energy saving and efficiency.

- Biofuels are often termed 'carbon neutral' as they generally come from organic material that is then re-grown. In fact, production causes substantial GHG emissions, mainly from making and using fertilisers and from fossil fuels use in processing. Using biofuels may even cause more emissions than conventional fuel. Savings can be increased through good crop management and minimising fossil fuel use in processing and fuel transport.
- Biofuels are not an unlimited resource. We need land to grow biomass for fuel, and our fuel demands are so vast that even small targets require major land-use changes. This has a major impact on bio-diversity and the environment. A Commission-sponsored study¹ found that meeting the EU's target of replacing 5.75% of fossil fuels with biofuels would consume 14-27% of EU agricultural land. To meet the biodiesel target, 192% of 2005 EU oilseed production would be needed, or 14% of the forecast world production in 2012. This target cannot alone be met by domestically-produced biofuels. The EU will need major imports of biofuel and biofuel feedstocks to supplement domestically-produced crops.

¹ EUCAR, CONCAWE & JRC (2006) <http://ies.jrc.cec.eu.int/wtw.html>

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¹ EUCAR, CONCAWE & JRC (2006) <http://ies.jrc.cec.eu.int/wtw.html>