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Biofuel controversy explodes as new concerns emerge

17 February 2010 | News

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Biofuel is becoming an increasingly controversial topic as more comprehensive tests are devised to understand its environmental impact. The debate hosted by ActionAid last night highlighted some of the humanitarian, environmental and practical concerns facing biofuel.

Because biofuel is a blanket term that encompasses a diverse range of sources—from food products that include wheat, sugar, maize and rape-seed oil to budding technologies in waste products (dubbed second generation biofuels) and algae (known as third generation). The majority of the biofuel we produce and consume today is derived from food products fermented into ethanol.

This type of biofuel has become increasingly controversial. Analysts agree on two major points—our ethanol consumption will increase significantly by 2020, and as a result food prices will also increase. Humanitarians are concerned that the poorest people in the world will be most affected by the food increase, and even a price increase as small as 5% will force already undernourished peoples to starve. A staggering 80% of a poor family's income might be dedicated to acquiring food. In addition, many local farmers are being pushed off of their land and under-compensated by large biofuel corporations.

At the same time, environmental concerns have reached a higher pitch, as new studies reveal fertilisers release NO₂ into the atmosphere—a gas that is 300x worse than CO₂. Also effecting climate change and biodiversity is land conversion—once a farm is converted to produce fuel instead of food, the demand for food still exists and thus more farmland is required, and deforestation is a likely consequence.

But the news isn't all bad for ethanol advocates. Ethanol has led to many breakthroughs in sustainability measurement. Greg Archer, co-author of the Gallagher review and debate participant, believes that we have enough arable land already dedicated to agricultural use to provide the world with enough fuel, feed, and food. With proper land-management we can increase crop yields while keeping the environment intact, making damaging land conversion unnecessary. Archer also added that the research done on biofuel sustainability has allowed for an unprecedented understanding of the problems we face, and that the same management practices applied to biofuels can be extended to other industries, and the rest of the agricultural sector in the future. Biofuel agriculture is becoming regulated more stringently than any other crop.

