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Questions About Biofuels' Environmental Costs Could Alter Europe's Policies

By [JAMES KANTER](#)

BRUSSELS — A top European farm official has suggested that yet-to-be-released studies by the [European Commission](#) could be used to “kill” heavily promoted and subsidized [biofuels](#) by focusing on their total environmental impact.

The suggestion, written in the margins of internal correspondence seen by The International Herald Tribune, could foreshadow a further retreat from the biofuel-friendly policies that the commission once called crucial in the fight against [climate change](#).

The industry has already been dogged by contentions that the main justification for policies supporting biofuels — that they are greener than fossil-based products — is unsound. Many environmental advocates claim that a large number of fuels grown from crops do not merit public subsidies or production incentives.

European governments agreed in December 2008 that only biofuels that reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 35 percent compared with fossil fuels should qualify for meeting the trade bloc's current goal.

But at the time, the governments directed the commission to investigate indirect land use change and, depending on the findings, to decide whether any changes needed to be made about which biofuels counted toward the goal.

The commission's studies are intended to determine the volume of emissions created when forest or land is cleared to replace food production lost to biofuel crops. Converting land can release large amounts of greenhouse gases when vegetation is cleared. Plowing also exposes carbon stored in the soil to the air. In the lumbering jargon of emissions experts, these effects are known as indirect land use change, or I.L.U.C.

In a memorandum, Jean-Luc Demarty, the top civil servant in the agriculture department at the European Commission, wrote to a colleague in December that “an unguided use of I.L.U.C. would kill biofuels in the E.U.”

His words suggest that most of the models in the studies used for calculating emissions would rule out fuels made from crops currently produced in the [European Union](#). That, he added in the handwritten note, “is probably the objective” of those who oppose incentives for some forms of biofuels.

Mr. Demarty declined to comment on Thursday, but other officials did not dispute the authenticity of the note.

In the United States, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has concluded that a number of biofuels would still meet emissions limits even after land-use changes resulting from increased biofuel demand.

But in the case of corn-based ethanol, the agency said that manufacturers would need to use “advanced efficient technologies” during production to meet American limits.

In Europe, commission officials are seeking to protect influential agricultural and industrial interests while maintaining a credible climate policy.

A spokeswoman for the European Commission, Marlene Holzner, declined to comment on what she termed internal working documents.

A group of environmental activists and lawyers made the European Commission document available to The International Herald Tribune this week. They contend the studies will support the case for using fewer biofuels and want the commission to release them.

Transport and Environment, a nonprofit group based in Brussels, first requested that the studies be released nearly four months ago.

Ms. Holzner said that the request's “wide scope” meant it was “not possible to check all the relevant material” within the normal deadline for releasing documents. Under European Union rules, the commission has an obligation to respond to information requests, but may not necessarily grant them. Ms. Holzner, however, said a “first batch” of studies should be made available next week.

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Amandine Lecourt, the spokeswoman for the European [Biodiesel](#) Board, said negative effects on emissions from indirect land use change were “still unproved.”

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