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Banning palm oil blocks good practices

Palm oil is not equal to palm oil, ETH Zürich argues in a blog. Since plantations differ massively in environmental and social criteria, a general ban of palm oil in biofuels would punish the wrong producers while having little impact on reducing deforestation.

Biofuels, including biodiesel, help to mitigate climate change by replacing fossil fuels. In the EU the main raw material for biodiesel is rapeseed, followed by palm oil. Annually, the EU imports around 7 mio. t of palm oil, of which over 40% is used for biofuels. In April 2017, the European Parliament voted to ban the use of palm oil in biofuels by 2020, ostensibly to limit the deforestation which has been blamed on the expansion of oil palm plantations.

A simple ban ignores the complexity of issues; while environmental organizations have highlighted illegal and environmentally damaging activities by the oil palm industry in Southeast Asia, other palm oil producers risk being unfairly tarred with the same brush.

E.g. the case of Colombia, the fourth-largest palm oil producer, with close to half a million hectares planted. Oil palm plantations in Latin America have mostly been planted on land formerly cleared for cattle ranching. Of 155,100 ha of new oil palm plantations established from 2002 to 2008, 51% were developed on pastures, 29% on croplands, and only 16% carved out of forests, savannas, and regenerating forest lands. Replacing fossil fuels with Colombian biodiesel produced on former pastures allows immediate reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, while it takes 30 to 120 years for biodiesel produced on former rainforest to compensate for the emissions resulting from deforestation.

The EU should therefore implement its ban selectively, discriminating among palm oil sources based on sustainability criteria. The EU's RED already provides a mechanism for such differentiation across all biofuel feedstocks. This mechanism needs improvement, as it does not yet take sufficient account of biodiversity and social issues, and instead focuses on greenhouse gas emissions. Greater investments in traceability from production through to consumption are also required.

If a ban ignores differentiation and traceability, it risks undermining efforts to improve sustainability in producer countries, especially in regions that are making substantial efforts towards sustainability. A more selective ban based on effective traceability of sustainable palm oil will not only support good practices in Colombia, but will also encourage producers and agro-industries around the world to do likewise.

Source: ETH Zürich

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