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ActionAid UK

Thank you for your correspondence.

We share your concerns about food security in developing countries and would like to take this opportunity to explain how we are addressing these issues as they relate to biofuels.

You may be surprised to know that relatively little human "food" is used in the process of making biofuels. For example, much of the world's biofuels are produced from sugar cane grown as an industrial crop. Also any maize or wheat used is usually of animal feed quality or lower and would not otherwise enter the human food chain.

If produced sustainably; biofuels, like other crops can help increase food security in some cases, by contributing to national economic growth, creating jobs and raising incomes.

However, biofuels may not be the right crop in all countries, so development must be undertaken with caution. The Government is currently funding work in Africa by the World Bank to determine criteria for biofuel development, and help national governments make informed choices about their options.

As part of the Food 2030 package, the Government undertook an assessment of the causes and implications of the agricultural food price spike in 2007/08 (published 5th January 2010 and available on Defra's website). The report concluded that biofuels had not been a significant cause of recent food price spikes worldwide.

This is important given that we will shortly be implementing the European Union's "Renewable Energy Directive" (the RED). This requires the UK to source 10% of our transport energy from renewable sources by 2020 (with biofuels expected to make a major contribution to this target). This is an EU-wide legal requirement, agreed in 2009 and part of a wider commitment to sourcing 15% of our overall energy from renewables by 2020. The National Action Plan that you refer to will not include any new commitments to increasing transport-related biofuel use in the UK. Instead, we will be consulting on our plans to meet these targets for the transport sector in early 2011.

We do not take the risks presented by biofuel production lightly. Like all agricultural commodities, biofuels (grown in the wrong way or place) have the potential to displace existing agricultural production into areas of forest or high carbon stock. This in turn could lead to increased green house gas emissions. That is why the UK is undertaking world leading research into indirect impacts of biofuel production. The results of this research will be fed back to the European Commission as we continue to lobby for the highest possible social and environmental biofuel sustainability criteria within the RED. We are also continuing to look at the interaction of biofuels with food prices and will feed this research into the Commission review of the RED, which needs to take place by 2014.

We will continue to work closely with representatives from all sectors as we work towards making sustainable biofuels an appropriate part of a low carbon transport system.

Kind regards,

Dr Victoria Hodkinson-Gibbs
Head of Cleaner Fuels and Vehicles Division