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Reducing the impacts of biofuels on biodiversity

There is mounting concern that increasing biofuels production is having significant biodiversity impacts. A study by the International Food Policy Research Institute estimated that achieving the EU target would lead to a global increase in cropland of more than 17,000 square km, primarily in Brazil, sub-Saharan Africa and former Soviet Union countries.

The EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED) does include sustainability criteria to avoid the production of biofuels in highly biodiverse areas. A major flaw is that such criteria only apply to biofuels. Therefore although the RED prevents a landowner clearing high biodiversity value land to grow biofuels, it does not stop him clearing the land for another crop that he already grows and then growing biofuels on the vacated land. Such indirect land use change (ILUC) is difficult to measure, but it is thought to be significant in terms of biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions.

IEEP is starting two projects that will attempt to identify policy measures to mitigate biofuel-related ILUC impacts. One study led by BIO Intelligence Service, will assess the effectiveness of measures that might reduce ILUC. These include promoting the use of feedstocks with little ILUC effect, e.g. by increasing yields and/or reducing the demand for land-intensive products (e.g. meat); land use zoning may be the most practical. IEEP is investigating this policy option for WWF Germany which is testing the feasibility of mapping suitable and unsuitable areas for biofuels in Indonesia and Columbia. IEEP will examine the potential for linking such maps to RED biofuel sustainability assessments and other agricultural commodities. The findings will be discussed at a workshop at the IUCN General Assembly in Korea in September (see IEEP Events <http://www.ieep.eu/newsletter/winter-2011-2012/ieep-conferences-and-events/>).

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