

GUILTY!

Government policy on the environment is, says CIWEM Executive Director, Nick Reeves, becoming more and more unhinged. The biofuels obligation just doesn't stack up and should be withdrawn.

Concerns over the threat to the global economy created by the sub-prime crisis are disguising an even bigger threat to the world: escalating food prices. It's been almost forty years since we've seen them rise so rapidly. For the UK and other developed countries – for the moment at least - it's just a minor irritation that gets a mention on television consumer programmes. For other nations, though, it's having devastating consequences that will come to affect us all very soon.

The oddity of this situation is that rising food prices is being caused, in part, by ham-fisted attempts by politicians to tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions. The introduction of green fuels made from crops grown on land that once produced food for people just doesn't make sense. Yet, biofuels are seen as the way ahead as we attempt to sustain our love of the motor car by making it greener and less polluting. So, instead of growing food for us, we're growing food for cars. How barmy is that? And I'm left to reflect that responsibility for environmental policy has been handed to the surrealists. The UN Food Agency has warned that "heartbreaking choices" will have to be made about which countries should receive emergency aid as the food crisis bites and as the price of food becomes unaffordable for millions of people already living in abject poverty.

Policies on climate change have more in common with a game of Russian Roulette than a properly thought out strategy. One of the bullets in the barrel comes courtesy of biofuels and the introduction of the Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation (RTFO). A thoroughly ill-conceived protocol that threatens to do untold harm to people and the planet.

The biofuels proposition began as an obvious response to an equally obvious problem. Vehicles are the third biggest source of carbon emissions in the UK and is an obvious area for action. With car use expected to rocket by 2020 on this already congested island, a blank refusal to consider biofuels as an alternative technology seemed short-sighted. Yet, it has become a big hairy green gamble. Should we grow crops to eat or to travel? Is biofuel production really green?

Food security is now becoming a very real problem that will soon reach our shores. In recent weeks there have been riots in Egypt, Cameroon, Haiti and other countries around the world over escalating food prices and shortages. The price of staples such as rice and wheat have risen by 75 per cent and 140 per cent respectively in the last few months. There's now a food crisis in more than 40 countries and hundreds of millions of people will be pushed further into crippling poverty and hunger.

From the 14th April this year fuel suppliers in the UK were legally required under the Fuels Obligation to add biofuel to the petrol we buy at the garage forecourt, creating a pernicious cocktail that is doing untold harm. To fill the tank of the average family car will use enough grain to feed one person for one year. The introduction of biofuels will consume at least 100 million tonnes of grain, which means that they are (along with population growth, increased demand and the booming economies of China and India) responsible for a growing food, as well as ecological, crisis. There is now an emerging humanitarian problem and those of us who use cars are now obliged to use food for fuel to feed them. No argument, we are being forced to contribute to a disaster of near-biblical proportions that is little short of criminal. Without our consent we have become accomplices to, and are guilty of, a horrible crime.

UK Transport Secretary, Ruth Kelly, has said she will keep biofuels policy under review and may change it in the light of evidence from a report she has commissioned. But, what more evidence does she need before she puts a halt to this fuel strategy? Already, there is mass civil disobedience and the lives of millions of the most vulnerable have been bent out of shape. And biofuels are not the only force behind the unrest. Land shortages, growing demand for meat and dairy produce, falling crop yields and higher fertiliser prices are all playing their part. Calls for people to eat less meat are growing in direct proportion to increasing demand for it. Farm animals consume around 760 million tonnes of food, enough to cover the global food deficit 14 times. Yet few will give up meat until it becomes unaffordable.

But, in the UK, it is the RTFO that is causing angst. The greenhouse gas benefits of biofuels have been overstated (or imagined) and there is real concern that their use will lead to further deforestation, the destruction of wildlife and habitats and will emit more greenhouse gases, not less. Why hasn't the Government worked this out and seen what is obvious to the rest of us? Ministers must heed the views of the UK's Chief Environmental Scientist, Robert Watson, who has warned that

the Obligation should be put on hold until the results of a review are known. He advances the compelling argument that it would be madness if the policy has the opposite results of what is intended. It would be a tragedy for millions if such a policy is pursued in haste and repented at leisure.

But, so far (and at the time of writing) Ministers have refused to halt the Obligation. They should really think again. Proof that biofuels are truly green and sustainable should have been in place long before the RTFO came in to force. But, there is no proof and the promised carbon dioxide savings are based on a false premise. Because the clearance of huge swathes of Indonesian rainforest and peatland or South American Savannas, the use of fertilizer to grow crops, conversion into biofuel and transportation to garage forecourts mean emissions caused by the manufacture of the so-called green fuels can vastly outweigh any emissions saved. Neither the technology, or the premise that underpins it, are sufficiently advanced to be safe and sustainable.

Meantime, the Government insists that its flagship environmental policy will make Britain's 33 million vehicles cleaner and will make it easier for motorists to use greener fuel. This looks like a bold and irresponsible claim that is not only in serious doubt but one which is de-stabilising the social, political and economic landscape of the planet, pushing millions in to deeper poverty and distress.

The truth is this: sustainable biofuels are a myth. Unfortunately, they are almost irresistible to politicians fixated by concerns over energy security and keen to look busy on climate change without calling on voters to change their consumption habits.

Nick Reeves

CIWEM

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