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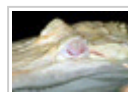


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Biofuels Could Do More Harm Than Good, UN Report Warns

Kelly Hearn
for [National Geographic News](#)
May 9, 2007

The global boom in biofuels is laden with environmental and social risks, even as it presents strong new prospects for mitigating human-caused global warming, a new UN study says.

The study also suggests that biofuels—energy sources derived from plant matter like corn or sugarcane—would serve better for heating and industrial power than for cars and buses, as is the current trend.



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"The use of modern biomass for energy production has the potential to significantly reduce anthropogenic green house gas emissions," reads the report, released yesterday by the cross-agency UN Energy working group.

Biofuels such as ethanol can be a cleaner job-generating energy source for 1.6 billion people who live without access to electricity, the authors say.

But the study, titled "Sustainable Bioenergy: A Framework for Decision Makers," also warns that an unregulated biofuels boom will spawn deforestation, deplete soil nutrients, and undermine food security by monopolizing farmland.

(Related: ["Ethanol Production Could Be Eco-Disaster, Brazil's Critics Say"](#) [February 8, 2007].)

"[T]he rapid growth in first-generation liquid biofuels production will raise agricultural commodity prices and could have negative economic and

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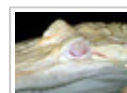
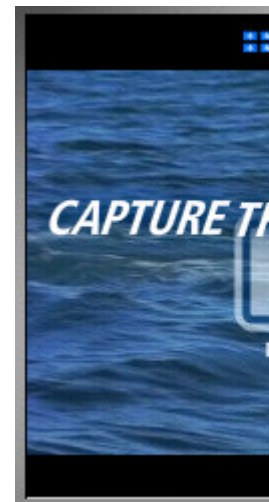


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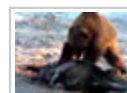
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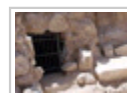


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social effects, particularly on the poor who spend a large share of income on food," the report says.

In many parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia, biofuels businesses have already cleared primary forests to plant energy crops such as palm. After fossil fuel use, deforestation is the largest single source of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, climate experts point out.

Alternative Use for Alternative Fuels

The report also suggests that balancing the potential pitfalls and benefits of biofuels requires a new approach to energy planning.

Biofuels are often cast as a climate-friendly alternative to fossil fuels used for transportation. But the study suggests that the fuels may be better used outside gas tanks for heating homes and providing industrial power.

"Current research concludes that using biomass for combined heat and power (CHP), rather than for transport fuels or other uses, is the best option for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the next decade—and also one of the cheapest," the UN report reads.

John Howe, a spokesperson for Celunol, a U.S.-based developer of ethanol technology, said his company agrees with many of the study's findings.

He said, however, that liquid biofuels can and should play a central role in reducing the transportation sector's petroleum dependence, alongside programs to reduce vehicle sizes, charge for carbon emissions, and encourage lifestyles requiring less personal mobility.

"The nations of the world will need to use a wide range of strategies to reduce oil dependency," Howe said.

"When it comes to choosing among these strategies, it's not a question of either-or, but both-and."

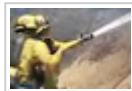
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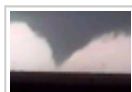
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