

## Biofuels

### *A letter to the Herald, April 2008*

Sir -

Both the government and the EU deserve credit for agreeing to rethink a counter-productive policy on the environment.

There was to be a compulsory 10% quota of biofuels in all petrol and diesel by 2020. Our own government started gradually implementing it last week with an initial requirement for forecourt fuel to have 2.5% biofuel mixed into it, as the *Herald* reported last week. It may have looked like environmental progress, but campaigners dubbed the date of the new rule, 15 April, Biofools Day.

We do not even know if biofuels, given current land yields and technology, will be of net benefit against global warming. A lot of energy is used in their production, and biofuel plantings are a significant (often indirect) cause of deforestation, in turn a major contributor to CO2 emissions.

But worse still is the effect on an even more immediate global crisis: hunger. Last year world wheat prices rose over 75%, and since January this year the cost of rice has more than doubled. There have been food riots in Cameroon, Haiti, Egypt and elsewhere. There are multiple reasons for the shortages, but clearly this is no time for making more land unavailable for food production. The UN's rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler, has called biofuels "a crime against humanity" because they can in effect take food from the poor to make petrol for the rich.

There may yet be a role for biofuels depending on how technologies develop. It is therefore sensible to retain a limited-volume programme, with strict rules ensuring land is not taken from forest or food. But it is right that the accelerated programme should be halted now. The whole episode is a useful reminder that just calling something green doesn't always make it good.

Yours

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