

UNEP meeting warns of dangers of biofuel production

Kennedy Abwao 6 February 2007 Source: SciDev.Net [NAIROBI] Environmentalists meeting in Nairobi say the trade in biofuels should be governed by environmental standards, and warn that planting crops solely for biofuels may cause catastrophic damage to the planet.

Speaking at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Council meeting held in Nairobi yesterday (5 February), Danish environment minister Connie Hedegaard said that environmental standards were vital if the international trade in biofuels was to be allowed to begin on a massive scale.

"We should be careful on biofuels…not everything that is biofuel is good for the environment. We should focus on second-hand generation of biofuels, not first generation," she explained.

Second-hand generation biofuels are produced from the by-products of food crops, such as sugarcane, rather than crops grown purely for biofuel production.

Hedegaard fears that large-scale production of biofuels in Asia — such as palm oil plantations in Papua New Guinea — could cause serious environmental challenges for the entire planet, starting with the clearance of forested land for plantations.

An increased focus on biofuel production across Asia and Latin America has spurred a "tropical agricultural revolution", with intense competition for land to grow food and fuel crops. The resultant forest clearance has led to a loss of biodiversity, as well as health problems in Southeast Asia due to smoke from forest fires.

It also contributes to global warming, as forest clearance releases carbon dioxide — the main gas responsible for climate change — into the atmosphere. Forests are considered better carbon sinks than agricultural fields.

According to UNEP, 10 million hectares of the Cerrado — one of the biggest biodiversity hotspots in Brazil — has been converted to soy plantations in the past 15 years.

UNEP executive director Achim Steiner said several companies had consulted the agency on how best to develop environmentally-sound standards for using biofuels.

"It is an economic choice. We have been holding meetings with biotech companies to look into standards for biofuels," Steiner said during a news conference in Nairobi.

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