

Who should take the blame for the biofuels tragedy?

Alan Moran

In Mexico early last year, 75,000 people took to the streets in protest of the increasing cost of basic grain, in what were branded the 'tortilla riots.' In March 2008, there were food riots in Egypt. And in April, Haitians rioted over the price of basic foodstuffs.

Yes, the joy of being green is never having to say you're sorry.

There shouldn't be any more comprehensively discredited environmental policy than the one which encourages food to be turned into fuel.

In early July this year, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper reported it had got hold of a secret World Bank report that said the subsidies to biofuels had led to a 75 per cent increase in food prices.

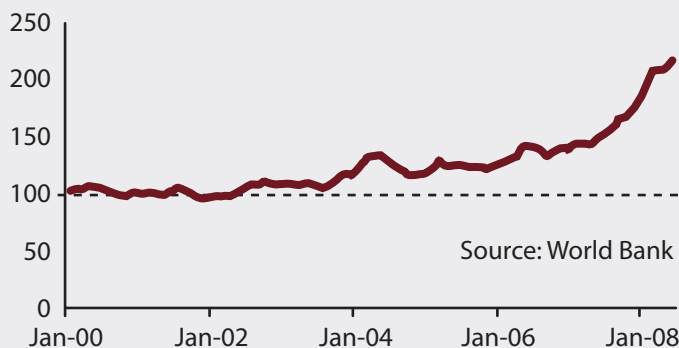
Nevertheless, in wilful ignorance of the human cost of the biofuel scheme, many green activists still support biofuels, preferring to place their lofty environmental considerations above these more human considerations. 'We must make the move to fuels from renewable sources,' said Greens Energy spokesperson, Louis Delacretaz, as he filled his tank at Melbourne's first retail biofuel outlet in Boronia in July. According to the ABC last November, the Greens want 'efficient, biofuel or electric cars and fast, efficient and cheap mass transit'. The Australian Conservation Foundation has been particularly voluble in support of biofuels in a number of parliamentary submissions and had called for biofuels to comprise five per cent of fuel in the transport sector.

The support of green groups for biofuels is complicated by their often vehement anti-technology beliefs. Oxfam, Greenpeace and WWF and Friends of the Earth now oppose the use of crops for fuel as part of their dislike of genetically modified crops.

Alan Moran is the Director, Deregulation Unit at the Institute of Public Affairs.

Chart 1: Global food prices

(Nominal US\$ index, Jan 2000=100, world export value weights)



But Friends of the Earth, while it may now be proudly in the anti-biofuels camp, was campaigning for crops to be converted into petrol as recently as 2004.

Our very own taxpayer funded CSIRO has been a staunch supporter of biofuels. Spokesman John Wright told Fairfax newspapers in July that beyond the next ten years Australia would have to rely on less conventional fuel types, such as hydrogen and biofuels. And the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler has decided to blame the food crisis on 'speculators'.

But as the results of the World Bank's leaked report makes clear, biofuels make clear the stark choice that many in the environmental movement try to shrink from. Should government policies prioritise human or environmental needs?

Fossil fuels will not last forever, though coal, greenhouse considerations permitting, can supply all conceivable energy needs for hundreds of years.

Essentially, fossil fuels are the compressed crops and plants aged over millions of years, leading to a far more concentrated energy source. They embody far more energy than recently grown crops ever can. New crops might store up a year's sunlight before they are burned but the conversion of the sunlight involves considerable wastage in the actual growth of the plants themselves.

If there is a clear 'energy of the future' it is most likely that it will be nuclear. But here too green groups face contradictions of their own making—for nearly half a century, the environmental movement has been a sworn enemy of nuclear technology.

But environmental groups need to face up to the mess they have already caused, and decide whether they can honestly continue supporting the destruction of food for fuel that has caused so much pain in developing countries around the world.

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