Biofuels need clarifying

By JACQUIS FATKA

A STUDY published in the scientific journal Science found that corn-based ethanol will nearly double the output of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions — instead of reducing them — by about one-fifth, according to some estimates. A separate paper in Science concluded that clearing native habitats to grow crops for biofuels generally will lead to more carbon emissions. The study’s results are not news to people involved in the debate over biofuels, but they did not report how the studies identified ways to avoid these negative aspects of current biofuels. Instead, they almost without exception designed hybrids to enhance corn yields and increase ethanol production. Biofuels from switchgrass, if grown on U.S. corn lands, would increase emissions 50% — and even more if the yield is doubled as GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years. Biofuels from switchgrass, if grown on U.S. corn lands, would increase emissions 50% — and even more if the yield is doubled as GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years. Biofuels from switchgrass, if grown on U.S. corn lands, would increase emissions 50% — and even more if the yield is doubled as GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years.

The first study, “Use of U.S. Croplands for Biofuels Increases Greenhouse Gases from Land Use Change,” found that using U.S. croplands to grow corn-based ethanol — instead of producing 20% savings — nearly doubles GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years.

“The result raises concerns about large biofuel mandates and highlights the value of using cleaner products,” the study said.

The current generation of biofuels will lead to a new stage of cellulosic biofuel development that will not only minimize land use changes but will cut GHG emissions 50% or more. The study used a model to estimate emissions from land use change (converting forest and grassland to new cropland), corn-based ethanol — instead of producing 20% savings — nearly doubles GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years. Biofuels from switchgrass, if grown on U.S. corn lands, would increase emissions 50% — and even more if the yield is doubled as GHG emissions over 30 years and increases GHGs for 177 years.

The second study, “Converting rainforests, peatlands, savannas or grasslands to produce food-based biofuels in Brazil, Southeast Asia and the U.S. creates a ‘biofuel carbon debt’ by re-leasing 17-420 times more carbon dioxide than the annual GHG reductions these biofuels provide by displacing fossil fuels,” the study found.

In contrast, biofuels made from waste biomass or from biomass grown on abandoned agricultural lands planted with perennial crops incur little or no carbon debt and offender immediate and sustained GHG advantages.

Land use

Many point to biofuels as the culprit for increased land being brought into agricultural production. However, biofuels groups remain in agreement that environmentally sensitive lands are not the way to get more grain for biofuels use but suggest increasing productivity on good lands.

Negotiators return to Geneva WTO talks

By IAN ELLIOTT

NEGOTIATORS returned to Geneva, Switzerland, last Friday after the round of technical talks on agriculture within the World Trade Organization had wound down.

New Zealand Ambassador Crawford Falconer, who chairs the agriculture talks, told negotiators he plans a closed-door session open to all WTO members including the lead 36 negotiators representing all major groupings. He said he expects he will wrap up this push on Feb. 22 with another meeting open to all governments.

“Future negotiations could be governments’ last attempt to narrow remaining differences on agriculture issues before fast and efficient talks on subsidies, supply management and export taxes on agricultural products start.

The next step is to move to a “horizontal” process where cross-sectoral trade-offs can be made by more senior officials. The final step would be a ministerial meeting probably in April.

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