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Energy

U.N. Agency Says Benefits of Biofuels Outweigh Risks, Urges Careful Management

ROME--The benefits of using biofuels as an energy source outweigh the risks, a U.N. group said in a new report.

The State of Food and Agriculture 2008, presented Oct. 7 by the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), is the United Nations' most comprehensive look yet at biofuels, which produce around 2 percent of the world's transportation fuels.

The use of biofuels is controversial, the report said. While the cleaner-burning fuel represents multiple environmental benefits, it also diverts developing country land use from agriculture used to feed those nations' residents to raising food costs.

According to Michela Morese, secretariat manager for the Global Bioenergy Partnership and one of the authors of the FAO report, biofuel use must be managed carefully in order to maximize the upside of the technology.

"We have to study the risks associated with the use of biofuels and act to control those risks," Morese told BNA. "But the correct response cannot be to pull back from this important fuel source because of the risks."

FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf agreed. "Current policies tend to favor producers in some developed countries over producers in most developing countries," Diouf said in a statement. "The challenge is to reduce or manage the risks while sharing the opportunities more widely."

FAO Says Oversight Needed

To make biofuel production more viable, FAO called for careful oversight of agriculture used for biofuels and the development of new technologies to make the creation of biofuels cheaper and to allow them to be made from new sources. It also called for the use of market mechanisms to help keep food prices low.

Until the publication of this report, the FAO had not officially and comprehensively weighed in on the controversial fuel source.

At a food security summit held in Rome in June, the final statement recognized the importance of biofuels, but referred to the controversy by recognizing biofuels' role in rising food price and calling for additional study (31 INER 728, 7/23/08).

FAO Calls Climate Top Priority

On Oct. 10, FAO said it will use World Food Day (Oct. 16) to declare climate change one of the group's top priorities.

In a statement, the organization said that the FAO Committee on World Food Security, which will conclude three days of talks in Rome on Oct. 17, will stress the impact that food production has on climate change through the production of biofuels, land conservation techniques, and the use of new technologies.

World Food Day, celebrated Oct. 16 each year to mark the date on which FAO was founded, will be the official launch of the climate change awareness initiative, FAO said.

Full text of the FAO report, The State of Food and Agriculture 2008, is available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/011/i0100e/i0100e00.htm>.

More information on the FAO climate change initiative is available at <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2008/1000934/index.html>.

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