

PRESS RELEASE

Issued on behalf of Wildlife and Countryside Link

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Bioenergy could do more harm than good

Leading environmental groups are today (July 18) making an urgent plea to government not to downgrade other environmental concerns in promoting bioenergy to help tackle climate change.

In a new report, *Bioenergy in the UK*, they say crops such as willow, oil-seed rape and miscanthus (elephant grass), grown for energy generation, could be sown over large areas of the UK, forming monocultures that provide little sustenance for wildlife.

It warns that without proper management, cultivation of crops for fuel, electricity and heat could cause further declines of farmland wildlife, damage the character of landscapes, harm historic and archaeological sites and damage soil and water quality.

And it calls for:

- A UK-wide assessment of bioenergy's potential and drawbacks;
- Certification of all bioenergy schemes to ensure producers prove cuts to greenhouse gas emissions;
- Planning policies that guard against unsuitable bioenergy developments and changes in land use.

The report, being published by 11 organisations, including the RSPB, National Trust, CPRE, Council for British Archaeology, and The Wildlife Trusts welcomes the opportunities bioenergy development creates and says the potential for environmental harm from new energy schemes can be avoided.

The organisations believe that where farmers are paid to grow bioenergy crops, they should be required to assess their environmental impact.

Ian Woodhurst, CPRE's Farming Campaigner and Chair of Link's Farming and Rural Development Group, said: "It's vital that bioenergy crops deliver the real carbon savings that they promise without damaging the character of our landscapes and our wildlife. With the right crop, in the right place, managed in the right way we can provide our communities with the sustainable energy supplies they need to tackle climate change. But we need to make sure we don't end up with an agro-fuel industry that ends up

wrecking the very thing we seek to protect.”

Abi Bunker, Agriculture Policy Officer at the RSPB, said: “This report should serve as a wake-up call to government. Instead of jumping on the bioenergy bandwagon and regretting the damage later, the UK should be developing the bioenergy sector with care, avoiding damage to wildlife and making sure that emissions really are reduced. Nearly 2.5 million acres could soon be planted with crops for biofuels and heat and power generation by 2020. That is a lot of land to sacrifice if environmental safeguards are not put in place first.”

Sian Atkinson, Conservation Policy Officer at the Woodland Trust, said: “This is a crucial time. Bioenergy offers some positive opportunities, not just for reduction of greenhouse gases, but also to improve biodiversity. For example, development of the wood fuel industry could stimulate markets for low-grade timber, enabling much-needed restoration of ancient woodland sites planted with conifers. However, there are also grave risks associated with the development of bioenergy, and we would urge the government to address these concerns as a matter of urgency.”

Frances Griffith, Hon Vice-President, Council for British Archaeology, said: “Although bioenergy offers a good potential avenue for reducing fossil fuel use, we must take care. Some of the establishment and cultivation processes for energy crops cause a great deal of soil disturbance. It is essential that proper advice is taken to ensure that we avoid archaeological sites - they may have survived in the ground for thousands of years, but they can be destroyed for ever in an afternoon.”

Helen Meech, Senior Policy & Campaigns Officer at the National Trust, said: “At many of our properties, the National Trust is using small-scale biomass for heating and hot water. It's a positive and practical way to cut our carbon emissions. However, it is crucial that the growth of bioenergy in the UK does not come at a high price - serious damage to our natural and historic environment. We're particularly concerned about potential environmental damage from intensively grown biofuel crops used for transport fuels. This report is a timely reminder that government has a key role to play to ensure that the growth of bioenergy in the UK is sustainable, working in partnership with conservation organisations, farmers and land managers.”

Ends

For a copy of the report call Cath Harris, RSPB Media Officer on 01767 693554 / 07739 921464.

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Notes to editors:

- The 11 groups behind the report are members of Wildlife and Countryside Link. The are: Association of Rivers Trusts, Butterfly Conservation, Bat Conservation Trust, Council for British Archaeology, CPRE, The Mammal Society, The National Trust, Plantlife, The RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, The Woodland Trust.

- The report calls for:
 - Minimum environmental standards and best practice guidelines for all bioenergy developments and government support conditional on meeting these;
 - Further research to fully understand the environmental impacts of energy crops;
 - Compliance with existing forestry and woodland standards to ensure sensitive management of forestry biomass;
 - Restoration of ancient woodland and other areas planted with non-native conifers

- The report highlights the promotion of small-scale bioenergy projects for heat and power generation, which, with environmental safeguards, could have considerable potential.

- The UK Biomass Strategy plans for a major expansion in the supply and use of bioenergy in the UK and the shift to a 'bio-economy'.