

JOHN SHEEHAN

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Letter to the Editor of *Science*

Dear Editor,

As someone who has invested almost two decades in the effort to develop sustainable biofuels at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), I applaud Fargione et al and Searchinger et al for their reports in *ScienceExpress* on biofuels and global land use. They have done a real service by airing one of the most important and least understood issues facing biofuels.

I encourage my colleagues in the biofuels community to resist the temptation to counter-attack and discredit these reports. In 1998, while at NREL, I collaborated with researchers at USDA on a groundbreaking life cycle analysis of biodiesel made from soybeans. In 2004, we tackled the thorny question of how to sustainably remove corn stover from fields as a source of biofuels—the first such life cycle study to account for soil carbon effects. The latter study touched lightly on the question of land use change, but I am the first to admit that no one has adequately addressed this issue.

We never saw our studies as “the last word” on biofuels. Others have built on—and improved upon—those studies. This is as it should be. Likewise, the authors of these *ScienceExpress* papers have built on the growing life cycle literature for biofuels, taking us one step further toward a truly global systems analysis of biofuels. Is their work the last word on land use change? No. But it’s a start. We in the biofuels community need the expertise that these authors and other economists and ecologists bring to the table. We need to work with them, not fight against them.

Let’s not view life cycle analysis as a tool to label industries as good or bad. Let us use this tool, instead, to engage in real dialogue to better understand how to avoid unintended global consequences as we forge a sustainable biofuels industry.

The public deserves nothing less.

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