

Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels

An initiative of the EPFL Energy Center



ÉCOLE POLYTECHNIQUE
FÉDÉRALE DE LAUSANNE

3rd Meeting of the Working Group on Environment- 7th September 2007 Full Minutes

1. List of participants to the Virtual Meeting:

Annie Sugrue	Erik Meidell	Lars Laestadius	Philipp Schukat
Barbara Bramble	Flo DiBona	Laszlo Mathe	Rachel Asante
Carlo Pereira	Jay Woosaree	Lera Miles	Richard Donovan
Carmen Virasoro	Jayant Sarnaik	Linda N Thompson	Richard Ottinger
Charlotte Opal	Jennifer Taylor	Liz Marshall	Ruaraidh Petre
Chris Dragsic	Justus von Geibler	Lynette Warren	Sachin Kapila
David McArthur	Kevin Fingerman	Martina Otto	Sebastien Haye
Debbie Hammel	Kirk Leonard	Naomi Pena	Tatiana Botelho
Dominic Blay	Kyle White	Neil Bird	

2. News and announcement

- The conference is being recorded (full record available at: <http://cgse.epfl.ch/webdav/site/cgse/shared/Biofuels/ENV%20WG/Minutes/3rd%20conference%20call/confcall3rdmeeting.mp3>).
- **25-28 September 2007, Basel, Switzerland: ILMAC 2007- Energy and Raw Materials: The Contributions of Chemistry and Biochemistry in the Future.**
The RSB's secretariat will attend the conference; Charlotte will chair one of the sessions on biofuels and Pr Puttgen (Director of the Energy center which hosts the RSB) will close the conference.
- **RSB and UNEP are organizing 2 joint events.** (1)Brazil - October 17th and 18th in Belo Horizonte, as part of the EcoLatina conference. Shangai - Michelin Bibendum Challenge, November 13th and 14th. Annie Sugrue, our new Social Impacts WG Coordinator, and Rauraidh Petre from Solidaridad will also participate in the GreenPower conference (Nov 5 and 6th) in Cape Town through Annie, Martina and Touria. The idea is to meet local stakeholders, especially those that we cannot reach through the media we are using in the working group, e.g. small farmers, government and others. These discussions will help us to get a local feedback on our standards and possibly adjust them to the local context. Any Working Group member is most welcome to join the discussion of course, but due to limited funds, each one would have to bear its own expenses.

- **Steering Board** conference call on the 20th of September. Prior to this, the members will receive the environmental principles, as reedited by our group, so that the Steering Board will know our main orientation choices and what needed to be changed regarding the original draft principles. The Steering Board will also meet in person early November.
- The first expert panel is about starting to work on the conservation aspects. We have invited participants inside and outside the working groups, trying to gather people with a strong expertise in this domain and to have a fair representation of all stakeholders (NGOs, industries, etc...). There will be an expert panel for each topic mentioned at the principle level.

2. Principle on Conservation/Biodiversity

Summary of the comments received before the conference

- *Concern that biodiversity was not covered, neither by the HCV concept nor by the term “wildlife”.*

Tentative answer: The definition of HCV1 is “Areas containing globally, regionally or nationally significant concentrations of biodiversity values” but we need to agree on what significant means. The reason why we thought to add something about wildlife, is the case where important species could be harmed outside HCV areas, but the wording may need more work.

- *Wildlife species” and “HCV” areas do nothing for the protection of existing organic or low-intensity farm lands, pasture lands, or natural meadows and other lands that may not be HCV areas.*

Tentative answer: True but the advantages brought about by these practices (less fertilizers and pesticides, soil recovery) are indirectly promoted through principles on soil and water protection for example.

- *Most English speakers understand “wildlife” to be animals (or insects... things that move), not plants, and certainly not soil organisms.*

Tentative answer: The scientific definition is “any living organism that remains undomesticated”. Popular understanding may be different but we shall rather stick to the scientific definition, since it is less questionable and subjective.

- *Not all native ecosystems will be captured by an HCV analysis, and a provision that production also not endanger (directly or indirectly) wildlife species may not prevent conversion either.*

Tentative answer: Although the HCV definition includes “*Globally, regionally or nationally significant large landscape-level areas where viable populations of most if not all naturally occurring species exist in natural patterns of distribution and abundance.*”, someone commented that this refers to intact ecosystems, whereas not all native ecosystems – especially those in highly fragmented/disturbed landscapes – are large or would qualify as “intact” at the landscape level. These ecosystems are worth being protected in addition to the pristine ones. It will be important to clarify/illuminate the prohibition on conversion of native ecosystems under one of the criteria

- *In order to be applicable in the short term, the priority areas included in standards must have already been delineated and mapped. Furthermore, HCV is not a concept agreed by the conservation community.*

This comment came several times and it seems that there is an organizational problem in trying to set the principle before knowing exactly all that we want to put under it. The question is also whether HCV Areas can or cannot be mapped somehow.

Hence, the best thing to do would be to establish the list of areas and/conservation values that we want to protect, and then find the best wording to cover all of them. In other words, once the criteria and indicators will be drafted, the principle above them will be easier to find.

Some propositions were also formulated to encourage the use of degraded land, perennial crops and also to establish a cut-off date for land conversion. These are very relevant examples of criteria that can distinguish between two level of sustainability, imagining that we will set a “minimum standard” and a “best standard” above the limit of sustainability.

COMMENTS DURING THE CONFERENCE

- From the field perspective, HCV areas, as currently defined, are so broad that it would put every piece of land off limits for biofuel expansion (e.g. Ecuador, where HCV Areas cover almost the whole country!). There are two sides of concern, (1) including all the possible areas for conservation and (2) not excluding biofuel production from everywhere.
- RSPO’s principles and criteria, which mention HCV, also say “new planting since November 2005 should not replace primary forest”. Is it something that the RSB plans to include? *Answer: HCV are usually a criterion under a “biodiversity” principle, which is a little upside down. The concept of a cut-off date has been suggested and will probably be included in the RSB standards as well.*
- the RSPO (criterion 7.3) has the very strong criterion of not replacing primary forest (as well as not replacing HCV).
- In any agricultural system, there are trade-offs and hence, it might be useful to consider a more general principle, which would be more encompassing and indicate something about those trade-offs, e.g. that you can improve some or all of aspects of the natural environment. But the concept of agricultural systems that cannot damage any of them gets into not recognising the reality. Rather mention “best practices” or “not to damage further critical aspects of the environment in any particular region”. To expect all biofuel production not to degrade any single one of these things sends the message that the group is unrealistic about how agriculture works. This would restrict biofuel production too much. There must be way to express this principle more positively, by improving some aspects for example.
- Cut-off date on conservation is a good thing (FSC use one, which is 1994) but there might also be ways of compensating or getting into the trade-offs and we should go, at the criteria level, deeper on that and not have just a pure cut-off date and nothing else.
- Clean Development Mechanism set a cut off date of December 30, 1989. It seems

- to have been widely accepted, and is useful because everyone knows which date they must have satellite data for. (There have been complaints as well, to be fair.)
- HCV identification. The key is at the criteria level. In other systems, the producers have a requirement to identify the HCVs, which would be highly region, country or even ecosystem specific.
 - The HCV definition, as worked out by the HCV network, is not only about environment values, but also about social values. For acceptance of the RSB in some regions, it would be critical that those HCVs are accepted by producers.
Answer: still under debate, whether to invite members from the SOC WG to the expert panel on conservation.
 - Suggestion: lessening the principle on HCV areas into a broader one on Ecosystem Biodiversity being preserved. Strong disagreement on mentioning HCV areas (subset of areas that require federation in this principle), rather a criterion.
 - HCV is broad enough, as we are not going into the details through this conversation. This should be examined further by an expert panel.
 - Understanding is that these standards will ultimately build on existing schemes when implemented, so we should probably make reference to them. If we don't do so in the wording, we might then have to explain and make sure that we refer to the same notion by different words, but it may be a problem with the implementation at the end.

CONCLUSIONS

Although it seems that the discussion still needs time and work, the following points found a temporary consensus:

- The first expert panel will very shortly start working on the conservation aspect (criteria and indicators). Hence, we shall keep the principle open until the criteria are established and in the end it will be easier to set a principle and find the good wording to include everything, once we have all the aspects identified.
- Since the Steering Board needs to know about the orientation our working group is to give to this principle, the current wording is temporarily kept with a clear specification that this principle will be subject to in-depth work by the expert panel and the Working Group, which will hopefully come to consensus on the wording by the end of this year.
- All the remarks are compiled and will be used in the further work on this principle.

3. Principles on soil, water and air

Summary of the comments received before the conference

Several have pointed out the need to **formulate objectives not in an ideal perspective but in terms of improvement**, but improvement compared to what? A disastrous situation can be improved and remain unacceptable however! We think there is a frame missing here and **the secretariat will request the Steering Board to take position on this: what is our objective with the environmental principles? What do we want to defend? Trying to**

come as close as possible to what nature would look like without human intervention or simply being better than other practices? This is important to clarify where we are going to and I guess this will also help with the wording on air, soil and water. For now, as explained in the proposal, **the positive wording implies a more complex wording since we would have to explain that we are not talking of all water resources or soils in general.**

One shall remind that biofuels bring about some benefits (GHG, energy security, empowerment, rural development...) and risks (pollution, loss in biodiversity, etc...), hence it comes logical that the principles regarding benefits should be positively formulated whereas principles regarding the mitigation of risks needs a negative wording.

COMMENTS DURING THE CONFERENCE

- The clarity and simplicity of the principles are important. Biofuels are in competition with oil and gas development, not with nature as perfection. So, we really need to find a way to reduce the damages without trying to make them perfect and make them so impossible that their production becomes unviable. We should not be absolutist because they are not produced in a world of ideal nature, but a world where competing fuels are fossil fuels + competition with other agricultural practices. *Answer: We need to define which level of improvement we target.*
- If an agriculture producer improves from a very bad situation and it's still imperfect, this is what we are looking for, i.e. to improve from where it is. If each producer improves the soil quality or has less pesticides runoffs, that's what we want! This is idealistic in another way.
- We are not looking for perfection but we need to be specific about the level of improvement we expect (at the criteria level).
- Disagreement with improvement concept. Paradox of having aspirational principles stated negatively. Negativity should be kept for the criteria.
- Another aspect of "positiveness" of principles, is also on content of standard vs. potential certification system options that allow stepwise or continuous improvement integration in the system, e.g. stepwise approaches to certification.
- You should indicate to the Steering Board that a number of participants believe the principles should be stated in a positive rather than negative fashion.
- The key point is that Principles be as clear as possible, whatever the positive or negative nature...this makes them easier to implement

CONCLUSIONS

The Working Group agrees to keep the current wording but the option to positively reword the principles will be submitted to the steering board (maybe a combination of negative/positive wording, as there is no consensus), as well as a request to take a position on the aspirational/idealistic vs. positive/realistic debate for the principle wording.

4. Principle on Biotechnologies

Summary of the comments received before the conference

- *We should not mention a social benefit in the environmental section.*

Tentative answer: We still don't know whether to have a discussion about GMOs in several working group; so far, a good possibility would be to have participants from the Working Group on Social Impacts in the Expert Panel and to communicate closely with the working group on Social Impacts (well, many of you participate to this group too!).

- *The discussion should be more balanced, by adding more about the potential benefits on GMOs.*

Tentative answer: true since we don't know much on this topic, so if some participants have technical information on this point, most welcome!

- *There is no meaning of highlighting biotechnologies more than others.*

Tentative answer: Although biotechnologies are not just a technology among others, it is true that this would make a very special principle compared to the general ones.

- *All the risks related to biotechnologies and GMOs were covered by the other principles.*

Tentative answer: This is something that needs more discussion and analysis. Hence, what we propose you is to keep the question open until we enter the criteria development phase. Every expert panel will enumerate every biotechnology risk related to the topic of interest (conservation and biodiversity, soil, water, etc...). In the end, it will be assessed whether all the risks are covered or if there is still a need for a specific principle about that. We may possibly remove this principle, if fully redundant.

- *Another aspect is that mentioning biotechnologies at the principle level will raise a lot of expectations and invite political debates whereas RSB has made the vow to remain as apolitical as possible.*

Tentative answer: We can possibly cover all the risks in the criteria without putting too much the attention at first sight on this particular aspect. It will not change much of the implementation and the strictness of criteria and avoid to bring too much debate on this principle.

COMMENTS DURING THE CONFERENCE

- Positive statement (improvement of environmental performance) is an important aspect of the RSB's positioning on biotechnologies. It is important to be kept at the principle level, because we will certainly face a barrage. If we can get behind environmental improvement in performance, that is an important principle to establish. *Answer: we could disseminate all the related aspects at the criteria level and hence remain strict about biotechnologies, but make them less visible at first sight. The implementation will remain the same but we may face fewer critics about this positioning.*
- The current principle implies that there are a lot of clear international rules on this topic, whereas it is not the case. This aspect could become a subset somewhere else there are also criteria referring to laws. In practice, national laws and in some cases, subnational ones, are more often related to by legal requirements.
- Why “environmental and/or social performance” in the principle? Should RSB be for including both aspects. *Answer: Further discussion is needed on this point. By increasing the income of farmers, some biotechnologies may improve local livelihood, but this can come with environmental trade-off. To which extend this could be acceptable? The formulation was meant to keep the possibility to accept a trade-off on this aspect.*
- This trade-off between social improvement and environmental performance falls true for all the principles. It s a recurrent problem that in every single one of these aspects, there are those trade-offs and if we mention them in one, it would be consistent to do so for all of them.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a consensus on keeping the current wording, working out the related risks at the criteria level and keep the possibility of removing the principle on biotechnologies if all the aspects of concern are covered at the criteria level under other principles.

5. Synthesis and next steps

Although there is still much work to be done on the wording of the principles, the working group has consensually agreed to suggest the following to the Steering Board as a general orientation, but with the clarification that all the principles will need the subsequent criteria and indicators to be fully developed before finalizing them. This is particularly important for the principle on conservation. Hence, the outputs from the expert panels and the Working Group will be needed in order to agree on a final version. Therefore, the temporary suggestion to the Steering Board is:

- 3) Biofuel production should not directly or indirectly endanger wildlife species or areas of high conservation value.
- 4) Biofuel production should not directly or indirectly degrade or damage soils.
- 5) Biofuel production should not directly or indirectly contaminate or deplete water resources.

- 6) Biofuel production should not directly or indirectly lead to air pollution.
- 7) The use of biotechnologies for biofuels production should improve their social and/or environmental performance, and always be consistent with national or international biosafety protocols.

The Steering Board's feedback will be forwarded to the Working Group members for discussion after their meeting on the 20th of September.

WG members are asked to keep posting comments on the Wiki and writing to sebastien.haye@epfl.ch for any suggestions or remarks.

Thanks for your encouragements and involvement in this initiative.