

Biofuels combat climate change

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Biofuels must be added to transport fuel to combat climate change, and fears over their environmental value and influence on food prices should not discourage the government from ordering an increase in their use, a group of leading agricultural scientists said on Friday.

The scientists mounted their defence of biofuels as environmental groups stepped up their campaign against them ahead of the introduction next week of the Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation (RTFO), under which petrol companies must ensure 2.5 per cent of the vehicle fuel sold in the UK is made up of biofuels.

“To blame biofuels for causing the increase in food prices is an over-simplification... We can’t afford not to use [plants as fuel],” said Gail Taylor, professor of biological science at Southampton University.

She said factors such as shortages of supply, because of poor harvests, and the changing diet of people in China as they become richer and eat more meat, which requires grain as animal feed, had much more influence on food prices.

Biofuels have been suggested as a greener alternative to fossil fuels because the plants from which they are made absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere as they grow, cancelling out the carbon dioxide given off when they are burned. But they have come under fire as green groups have claimed they produce little savings in terms of carbon dioxide, contribute to the destruction of rainforest and raise food prices because they compete with food for scarce fertile land and water.

Graham Wynne, chief executive of the RSPB, called for a rethink of the government’s targets: “Some biofuel production will cause habitat loss, displace food production and emit more greenhouse gases than are being saved.”

Most people were unaware of the government’s plans for the RTFO, said Kenneth Richter, biofuels campaigner at Friends of the Earth. “Most people will be horrified to know the government is putting biofuels in our petrol when the damage they do to forests could make climate change worse.”

But there was “sufficient evidence” of the environmental benefits of biofuels to justify the government’s targets, said Nigel Mortimer, research manager at the University of Loughborough. Studies have found using biofuels produces about a third less carbon dioxide than using fossil fuels, though this varies depending on how the biofuel was produced.

Richard Murphy, of Imperial College London, rebuffed claims that there was a shortage of agricultural land available for growing biofuels. He said the world was only using half of its available agricultural land, and much of that was used inefficiently.

He said second generation biofuel technology, which would allow waste materials such as straw to be converted into ethanol, was “less than five years” away from being commercially viable.