

First approved EU sustainability schemes for biofuels

On 19 July 2011, the European Commission issued a list of the first sustainable voluntary schemes for biofuels recognised directly in the 27 EU Member States. According to the Energy Commissioner, Günther Oettinger, the EU has to secure the entire biofuels production and supply with the highest sustainability standards in the world under a transparent and reliable system.

Voluntary schemes for biofuels

Voluntary schemes are control systems which are accredited by the European Commission to certify sustainability of biofuels. Companies importing or producing biofuels must demonstrate through the necessary audits that the production process is sustainable. These schemes will be run by private companies and institutions and not directly by the European Commission. To date, the Commission has accredited seven companies to act as a scheme.

Criteria

In order to receive government support for mandatory national renewable energy targets, biofuels in the EU, locally produced or imported, have to comply with sustainability criteria. The objective of these criteria is to prevent the conversion of areas of high biodiversity and high carbon stock for the production of raw materials for biofuels.

Practically, the main sustainability criteria that the schemes have to check include land use conditions. Biofuels that have been grown on land that was once rainforest or natural grassland, or protected land with a unique ecosystem cannot be considered as sustainable. Moreover, no wetland can be dried for this purpose.

Secondly, a minimum amount of greenhouse gas savings over the whole production chain needs to be guaranteed. Biofuels need to stand a comparison with fossil fuels, such as petrol, proving that they emit at least 35% less greenhouse gases. By 2017 these savings have to reach at least 50% and at least 60% by 2018 for biofuels produced by new installations.

Thirdly, the whole production chain, from the planting of crops to the point of consumption, needs to be monitored.

Controls

Controls are to be realised by independent auditors checking all the necessary documentation and exercising on-the-spot checks.

Check of the schemes by the Commission

For the European Commission to accredit a scheme it has to be ensured that all companies in the supply chain are audited before making any claims about sustainability under the scheme and that the auditors fulfil their requirements of competency and independence. Protection against fraud is provided for the administrative system and a follow up audit of the companies in the supply chain takes place at least once per year. Once these conditions are fully complied with, the Commission will adopt the decision to recognise the scheme for a period of five years.

National systems and voluntary schemes

According to the Renewable Energy Directive, Member States are required to set up a national system through which companies will have the ability to demonstrate their compliance with the sustainability requirements for biofuels. This way, companies can make use either of the national systems or the voluntary schemes. Nevertheless, standards between Member States may differ and accordingly, each national system is only valid in the Member State in which it was accredited.

Sustainable schemes recognised by the Commission

Following a detailed assessment, the Commission has, to date, recognised the following schemes:

- ISCC (German (government financed) scheme covering all types of biofuels)
- Bonsucro EU (Roundtable initiative for sugarcane based biofuels, focus on Brazil)
- RTRS EU RED (Roundtable initiative for soy based biofuels, focus on Argentina and Brazil)
- RSB EU RED (Roundtable initiative covering all types of biofuels)
- 2BSvs (French industry scheme covering all types of biofuels)
- RSBA (Industry scheme for Abengoa covering their supply chain)
- Greenergy (Industry scheme for Greenergy covering sugar cane ethanol from Brazil)

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