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Industry wants clear priorities for alternative transport fuels

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As EU lawmakers ponder the contribution of alternative fuels to the EU's CO2 emission reduction targets, transport stakeholders are demanding that political decisions be taken and realistic targets be set, to give industry a stable legislative framework that allows it to prioritise R&D spending.

Background:

To improve energy-supply security and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the EU has set itself the objective of a 10% substitution of traditional fuels in the road transport sector (gasoline and conventional diesel) by alternative fuels before the year 2020. Three alternative solutions are seen as promising: biofuels, natural gas and hydrogen.

As part of Europe's strategy for reducing oil dependency and fighting climate change, EU leaders also committed, in March 2007, to raising the share of biofuels in transport from current levels of around 2% to at least 10% by 2020.

Too many uncertainties surround alternative fuels to allow fast decision-making in fields like biofuels, stakeholders argued on 2 December at an event assessing the possible alternatives, trends, likely timescales and consequences for alternative fuel development.

"Energy-delivery infrastructure for transport and the move away from hydrocarbons over an extended period needs to be tackled in a much broader structure than just the vehicle manufacturers themselves or vehicle users," said British Conservative MEP Malcolm Harbour. For example, the overall supply infrastructure for energy substitution must also be considered, he said.

"Before we opt for a solution [one specific alternative fuel], we have to look at the complete spectrum of it," said Lars Holmqvist, CEO of the European Association of Automotive Suppliers (CLEPA). "Industry is ready to invest in biofuels, not just to test whether something is viable and works," he explained. "We need to agree on a sustainable biofuel and be sure that it is the one. No 'stop and go' legislation is possible."

Indeed, after having committed last year to raising the share of biofuels in transport to 10% by 2020, EU leaders later reneged on their decision, signalling that the agreed goals may be amended due to fears of intolerable hikes in food prices, mass deforestation and water shortages (EurActiv 14/03/08).

Holmqvist also noted that the automotive industry was not responsible for energy sources. But "we are ready to adopt our systems" if someone develops new fuels, he said.

Paul Greening of the Automotive Industry Association (ACEA) also called for a reliable legislative framework and fixed targets "so that we can start development".

"Any 'stop and go' legislation needs to be avoided," agreed Isabelle Muller, secretary-general of oil-refining industry association EUROPIA. "Industry needs stable legal framework, realistic, achievable targets to start investments and some certainty of that investments in advanced biofuels for example are profitable," she underlined.

Muller argued that hydrogen or electric cars will not play a role in the EU's CO2 reduction targets by 2020, as technological considerations - together with building a new infrastructure - is too significant a constraint. At the same

time, biofuel take-up will depend on the final definition of sustainability criteria and the availability of biofuel that meets those criteria, as well as the capability of industry to use the required levels of bio components, she predicted.

"The best alternative fuel is the one we don't use," Muller concluded, calling for better driving behaviour and more efficient infrastructure and traffic management, "two win-win options".

Links

European Union

- Commission: EU strategy for Biofuels