Meeting the expectations of bioenergy

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Bioenergy contributes to over 60% of the renewable energy consumption in Europe, with an important share in the heat and transport sectors in particular. The National Renewable Energy Action Plans provided by Member States for implementing the Renewable Energy Directive (2009/28/EC) confirm the key role of biomass in the future EU energy system: according to national projections, bioenergy is expected to contribute 56.5% of the gross energy production from renewable energy sources in 2020! However, despite the high expectations, several EU policy files and discussions may hamper this expected trend and the successful deployment of these technologies in Europe.

Carbon accounting of bioenergy is at the centre of political focus since the introduction of the so-called ‘carbon debt’ issue as supported by NGOs. Besides its detrimental effect on the credibility of the bioenergy sector, the debate also threatens the current market conditions for bioenergy such as support schemes and the Emission Trading Scheme.

Possible future measures under Ecodesign and Energy Labelling for local space heaters and solid fuel boilers, imposing efficiency and emission requirements for stoves and small scale boilers and providing efficiency labels for consumers, are currently under discussion. The very strict Ecodesign requirements on emissions currently proposed (exceeding the EN 303-5:2012 standard currently applied in several member states) threaten to force a large number of existing stoves and boilers out of the market.

The report on indirect land use change voted by the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety of the European Parliament proposes to modify and extend the sustainability criteria for biofuels and bioliquids – elaborating extensively on the sustainability of woody biomass. Moreover, the ENVI committee proposal to introduce a cascading principle for waste and residues and an indirect land-use change factor to short-rotation coppices and forests, without robust and sound justification, is also subject to high concerns.

In parallel to this, EU media recently announced that the European Commission is currently discussing a proposal for a Directive on sustainability criteria for solid and gaseous biomass used for heat and electricity production. AEBIOM has taken a position in favour of an EU-harmonised sustainability scheme provided that this is proportional and cost-effective.

Given the current EU policy debates, one can question whether the bioenergy sector will be able to deliver up to current expectations. Stable market conditions and adequate policy frameworks need to be put in place to enable sustainable biomass to make a meaningful contribution if society is to achieve its ambitions on renewable energy and climate change mitigation.