

30 January 2008

Submission

to the

Local Government and Environment Select Committee

on the

Biofuel Bill

“What injustices and conflicts will be provoked by the race for energy sources?”

Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace, 2007*

Summary of main points:

- In general, Caritas supports the government’s intention to seek alternative sources of energy to our current dependence on fossil fuels.
- However, despite some protection to forests and food production being provided in Clause 34G, we believe there is still insufficient legislative protection, in the light of the demand that will be created by the mandatory requirements for biofuel supply.
- Serious consideration needs to be given to limiting biofuel requirements to New Zealand sources only, which would reduce the environmental and social impacts of production in developing countries, and increase our self-sufficiency in fuel supply.

Introduction

1. Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand is the Catholic agency for Justice, Peace and Development. We are mandated by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference to work for the elimination of poverty and injustice through development and aid work internationally, and through advocacy and education for social justice in New Zealand.
2. Our position on this Bill is based on:
 - Catholic social teaching, particularly the principles of **Stewardship** which calls on us to care for all the resources of creation and **Preferential protection for the poor and vulnerable** which asks us to consider every policy by its effects on the poorest members of our local and global communities.
 - Our experience as a development agency working in over sixty projects in the Pacific, Asia, Latin America and Africa. In particular we draw on experience working with rural communities in the Pacific and Asia.
 - Our insights into the experience of climate change learned through our membership of the Caritas Internationalis confederation, in particular in our own region of Caritas Oceania.

Position on the Bill

3. In general, we support the government’s intention to seek alternative sources of energy to our current dependence on fossil fuels.

4. However, we are concerned to see that the Bill sufficiently reflects our concern, which is shared by other development agencies, that alternatives to fossil fuel come from sustainable sources which do not themselves contribute to environmental destruction or to a reduction in food supply.
5. The United Nations warned last year that unless biofuel development is carefully managed, it could result in widespread food shortages and displacement of indigenous people and small farmers. We recommend that the advice of the United Nations in its document *Sustainable Bioenergy: A framework for Decision Makers* (April 2007) contributes to the Select Committee's consideration of this issue.
6. We are additionally aware that scientific advisors to the European Union have recently warned that the production of biofuel can be more polluting than traditional fossil fuels. An assessment of the carbon emissions produced by biofuel need to consider not just its actual use in a vehicle, but also the emissions created during the complete production cycle of that biofuel.
7. The obligation for a mandatory proportion of fuel to be supplied from biofuel sources will create demand which may put more pressure to transform land currently used for food or forestry into biofuel plantations. We understand this has been the case following the targets set by the European Union.
8. We appreciate that the Bill does recognise some of these factors, by including the ability to set specific environmental standards for biofuel in Section 34G. However, we believe this may not fully recognise the full impact of biofuel production on vulnerable communities in our region.
9. "Sustainable sources" in biofuels are very different to that of other industries such as sustainable forestry. Unlike forests, palm oil plantations, for example, do not ever occur naturally, but have always displaced other activities. In our region of Asia and the Pacific, biofuel plantations must be understood to be a change of land use, whether previously in native forest or other forms of agricultural use.
10. Our experience is that land use changes in developing countries rarely occur without impacts on the environment or on the lives of vulnerable groups of people. If New Zealand seeks biofuel from sources in developing countries - such as the growing industries in Malaysia, the Philippines, Laos, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia - we are inevitably asking local people to make sacrifices to meet our demand for fuel. A requirement in our legislation for a mandatory supply of biofuel will lead to an increase in demand, and therefore to an increase in temptations to change current land use to meet that demand.
11. We understand that the targets given in this legislation can potentially be met through locally sourced biofuel, produced from New Zealand waste. This includes the byproducts of sewage – such as diesel produced in Marlborough from algae on sewage ponds – and of the forestry and agricultural industries.
12. We ask the Select Committee to give serious consideration to limiting the mandatory percentage of biofuel to New Zealand sources, and to setting the limits according to our ability to meet that demand locally. In addition to reducing the impact on the lives of impoverished people in vulnerable communities, this would have the additional benefit of assisting New Zealand to become more self-sufficient in fuel production.
13. In addition, all New Zealanders need to understand that our current environmental challenges and emergencies require a much deeper level of commitment to lifestyle changes, rather than simply to exchanging one form of fuel for another. We appreciate that this Bill is only part of a much wider climate change strategy. But the availability at the petrol pumps of alternative forms of fuel can lead to complacency about the extent of change that is required of us as individuals, communities and as a country. Issues like the availability and affordability of public transport options must be part of the debate around this Bill.

Caritas experience

14. Although Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand has not specifically sought to work on the issue of biofuels, it has inevitably come to the attention of our international development staff members, as they engage with impoverished communities in Asia and the Pacific.
15. Our International Programmes Manager Tara D'Sousa brought back photos from Laos last year, to show us the devastation of the landscape that she witnessed traveling to visit our partner organisations. The photo on the left is of the normal forest cover in rural areas in Laos. The photo on the right is of the clearing of the forest for biofuel plantations. This was not an isolated instance, but typical of large areas of land cover. Whole villages are often “resettled” (moved) to make way for these plantations.



16. Hon David Parker, the sponsor of this Bill, has acknowledged that there are important climate change implications in forest clearances. This kind of devastation will of course undermine the efforts and sacrifices of many individuals, organisations and businesses who seek to make the kind of permanent changes required to reduce our carbon output.
17. For Caritas, the effects are even more urgent in terms of the immediate suffering of people displaced by these activities. As forests are cleared, people lose their homes, livelihoods, and sources of traditional food and medicines.
18. There can be a tendency in New Zealand to think of the loss of the world's biodiversity as a theoretical problem, as if losing the variety of life on earth is like losing rooms in a museum that we haven't got around to visiting yet. But for people who live in connection with the land, the losses are of essential material for their survival.
19. Last year, Michael Mrong of Caritas Bangladesh told a number of New Zealand Catholic parishes and schools the story of the forestry “experts” who visited an area of forest inhabited by Adivasi – the indigenous people of Bangladesh. He told us: “They roped off an area of seven square feet and asked the experts what they saw there. They said they saw two trees and some small plants. Then they brought an Adivasi elder, who had no formal education. He said he saw 63 medicinal plants – and two big trees.”

Conclusion

20. We are not experts in environmental issues, and do not understand all the technicalities of fuel production. However, we are witnesses to the suffering of communities who are becoming further marginalized and impoverished through the demand for fuel in countries like New Zealand. We ask the Select Committee to remember the impact of this Bill on the lives of millions of people in Asia and the Pacific who depend on the land for their survival.