

Crop production - plate or tank?

As part of the “University of Hohenheim – strength through communication” thematic year 2011, Dr. Detlef Virchow, Executive Manager of the Food Security Center at the University of Hohenheim, talked to us about the medium-term risks of E10 biofuel in relation to global food safety.



Super E10

The emergency petrol summit on 8th March 2011 was called to discuss the unpopular new fuel in the presence of oil company representatives, car makers and motorists. Minister of the Environment Norbert Röttgen does not believe that there is likely to be a dilemma in Germany relating to the use of crops for the production of biofuel. Dr. Detlef Virchow, Executive Manager of the Food Security Center at the University of Hohenheim, outlines his position in the following interview, which is a contribution to the “University of Hohenheim – strength through communication” thematic year 2011.

Dr. Virchow, do you agree with the German Minister of the Environment Norbert Röttgen who believes that the new E10 biofuel does not increase the competition between tank and plate in Germany?

Yes and no, depending on the geographic area we are talking about and on the timescale of the effects. In Germany and other developed countries in the northern hemisphere I do not believe that there will be any direct competition between crops used for human nutrition and those used for the production of bioethanol. Germany has many fallow areas and is more than able to purchase any food it needs on the world market. German farmers may even be able to tap new sources of income by opting to grow renewable energy carriers. In addition, I also believe that high prices for these plants could well be positive for the farmers. I do not foresee any dramatic effects on food availability in the short term.

Does this mean that there is no danger associated with the cultivation of crops for biofuel production?



Dr. Detlef Virchow, Executive Manager of the Food Security Center at the University of Hohenheim
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I do not think there will be any direct consequences for Germany. As far as indirect consequences are concerned, all plants used for human food have to be grown somewhere, and if they are not grown in Germany they need to be grown elsewhere. The risk then is that any danger that may be associated with the cultivation of crops for biofuel production will be felt by other countries. And as has been seen in the past, developing countries will be affected the most. The tortilla crisis in Mexico is only a foretaste of how the USA's crop cultivation policy will affect the American continent in the medium term.

In this specific case is it true to say that there was no real lack of corn for human nutrition?

Yes it is. But it shows that any shortage in food increases speculation on the markets, with the usual results for developing countries: hunger and increasing poverty. The hunger riots in Haiti that came about due to exploding prices and the shortage of food in early 2008 have shown that the poor and hungry are no longer satisfied with empty promises.

But this is unlikely to happen in Germany, is it?

No, of course not. But we have to keep in mind that the behaviour of a global player like Germany has signalling effects on other countries. If we decide to use large agricultural areas for the

production of biofuel crops, other countries will follow our example. And this will mean that people with less money, i.e. the poor in developing countries, will no longer be able, or only partially be able, to cover their food requirements on the market.

Does this mean that E10 is a risky venture?

Yes. Although German car owners will be primarily concerned just about their car engines, the production and sale of E10 will initiate different functional chains that will lead to an increase in hunger and poverty in developing countries. In addition, these chains will also contribute to increasing environmental destruction. The introduction of E10 will prove to be a fairly explosive mixture, and will most likely only very rarely have a productive outcome such as it has had in Tunisia and Egypt.

In addition, there are general doubts as to whether E10 is actually able to reduce environmental pollution in Germany. I think that we need more intelligent ways than E10 to solve our energy problems.

Background:

Food Security Centre (FSC) at the University of Hohenheim

The Food Security Center's mission is to provide innovative and effective scientific contributions to reducing hunger and achieving food security, thus contributing towards the progress of Millennium Developmental Goal 1, especially the eradication of hunger and malnutrition. The FSC is directed by Dr. Detlef Virchow.

The FSC is backed by the University of Hohenheim and its 50 professors who work in the agricultural, natural, economic and social sciences and also have specialist skills in tropics-related aspects. The Food Security Center has partners at different universities and research institutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Its major research foci centre on the availability of food, the access to and use of food, the quality and safety of food and the processing of food. The FSC also takes into account gender equality and the rights of women as well as the sustainability of agricultural production processes and value creation chains.

2011 thematic year: "University of Hohenheim – strength through communication"

In 2011, the University of Hohenheim has chosen to specifically focus on "communication". The 2011 thematic year will provide a platform for a broad spectrum of scientific contributions. The University of Hohenheim itself, according to its declared mission, maintains a neutral stance whilst offering scientists the possibility to present their reasoned arguments.

Further information:

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