

Biofuels and food shortages

Sir, There are both good and bad biofuels, and if we are to meet rising demands for food, fuel and industrial products, we cannot afford to ignore biofuels or simply dismiss them as wishful thinking (report, March 7).

While more research is required before we can fully understand their potential, to dismiss them all at this early stage is ridiculous. Engineering best practice will ensure that any biofuel production that does happen will consider the totality of the new product, including the carbon footprint it creates and its impact on global food and energy supplies.

Suggesting that we should forget biofuels at this early stage is akin to suggesting we should all stop eating food because chocolate is rotting our teeth.

DR DAVID BROWN
Chief Executive
Institution of Chemical Engineers.

Sir, Demand for agricultural products is growing for many reasons, such as expanding population, evolving diet expectations and biofuels. All around the globe, farmers will be expected to boost production to respond to the increase in demand. This could have a deleterious environmental effect if more land is taken up by agriculture. However, there are solutions. Plant science can help farmers to increase yields on the same size of fields, thus protecting biodiversity and the natural habitat. These technologies also can be used to reduce tillage, which protects soil and water

resources. Seeds that are resistant to heat and drought can help to address the effects of climate change. Seed coatings to get crops off to a protected start can save crops.

HOWARD MINIGH
CropLife International, Brussels

Sir, True, the price of food stuffs has risen, in many cases sharply. Are biofuels the cause? Probably not. In Brazil, bioethanol has been produced for more than 30 years. In the US, capacity has expanded with Government policy to achieve a degree of fuel security. Europe has seen biodiesel as easy to produce from waste vegetable oils.

Bioethanol made from cereal crops has really gained traction in Europe only in the past five years. The US has encouraged building bioethanol plants in the corn belt, but driving US policy are fuel security and support for farmers, not green issues.

The UK has been considered in its bioethanol policy. EU targets are beyond the present capacity of UK land to produce feedstock without disturbing the human food chain, so the UK has lower targets. We produce feed grain that is not used in human food owing to its quality. This surplus, low-grade wheat is exactly right for bioethanol.

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