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Burning issues in climate negotiations

Biofuels figure largely in the new round of climate negotiations to prepare a post-Kyoto agreement. Biofuels have been hailed as the carbon neutral or at least a low carbon alternative to fossil fuels. But the tides have turned and critics argue that if the total life cycle of biofuel production is taken into account, they are less efficient than fossil fuels and may even contribute to net carbon emissions. Moreover, so-called 'indirect land use effects' could take land away from food production or nature reserves. In this respect, US president-elect Obama could play a pivotal role. Unfortunately, he has put himself in a complicated position.

In order to win over the conservative states of the Mid West, he committed himself to support the current corn based bio-ethanol policy, which has been proposed by president Bush as part of his overall energy security policy for the US. And exactly such corn based ethanol, which has boosted farm revenues, is under the most environmental scrutiny, from pressure groups as well as from developing countries, because of the farm subsidies.

At the same time, Obama has taken a strong stance on climate change and carbon reduction. How is he going to reconcile these two positions?

While he waits for the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to come up with new proposals for a bio-fuels directive based on more solid science than before, he should start to bring the energy and the agricultural communities together. These are groups that do not often talk to each other, yet they need to urgently because alternative energy from biological sources must be accepted by both sides. For example, funds could be taken from the farm bill to invest in innovative bio-fuel at farm level.

Also, Obama should promote better fact finding on the real effects of biofuels beyond what the EPA is doing now, because, as usual, the devil is in the details (simply put: not all biofuels are alike, nor are all areas where they are grown). We would all welcome the US to take the lead on setting this issue right, well before the end of the Kyoto protocol.

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