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Chinese biofuel 'will not stress water resources'



Sorghum crops require less water than corn

Sun Xiaohua
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Source: SciDev.Net

Experts have refuted a study's claims that China's plans to greatly increase production of biofuel will put greater stress on the country's water supplies.

The study, released today (11 October) was conducted by researchers from the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in Sri Lanka, part of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

Water is already scarce in China, and the growing population is using more water through its increased consumption of food, the authors say.

Growing crops for biofuels will put more strain on the water supply and seriously undermine China's ability to meet future food and animal feed demands.

Countries like China and India should look to alternative methods of producing biofuel, states the report. These include enzymes to convert plant cellulose into biofuels and developing biofuel crops that will grow in degraded or dry lands.

But Wang Hongguang, director general of China's National Center for Biotechnology Development, said that concerns put forward by the report have already been considered, and solutions have been found that won't threaten the country's water resources, farmland and food security.

For example, China's State Council issued a directive in May to stop using corn — which is consumed by both humans and animals — for biofuel production, and shift to using non-staple crops like sorghum, batata (a type of sweet potato) and cassava instead.

Zhao Lixin, director of the Center of Energy and Environmental Protection Technology Development at the Ministry of Agriculture, told SciDev.Net that sorghum, batata and cassava consume up to half of the water of corn, and crops such as cassava also grow in the south where water resources are rich.

"Meanwhile, the plants can grow on barren land, not vying for farmland resources with food," said Zhao.

The shift to these crops will be completed in the next five years, said Xiong Bilin, deputy director of the Department of Industry under the National Development and Reform Commission.

China officially released its renewable energy development plan in September (see [China launches large-scale renewable energy plan](#)).

According to the plan, by 2020, China will produce ten million tonnes of fuel ethanol and two million tonnes of biodiesel, a four-fold increase on 2002 levels.

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