Chinese biofuel 'could endanger biodiversity'

SciDev.Net, 18 March 2008 - Using China's forests and 'idle land' to produce biofuels could pose a threat to biodiversity, warned experts at an international meeting.

Spike Millington, chief technical advisor to the European Union-China Biodiversity Programme, raised the problem earlier this month (7 March) at the International Workshop on Biodiversity and Climate Change, held in Beijing, China.

In July 2007, China released its middle- and long-term plan for renewable energy. While shunning corn or soya-based biofuel production to avoid endangering food security, the plan encourages the development of non-grain biofuels, including cassava- and sorghum-based ethanol in northeast and south China, and jatropha-based biodiesel in southwest China's Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.

In line with the national plan, companies and government agencies including PetroChina, the State Forestry Administration and local governments in Sichuan and Yunnan have revealed ambitious plans to develop jatropha-based biodiesel projects.

But Millington said, "The region of southwest China targeted for biofuels coincides with the home of the last remaining intact natural forests in China." He added that the degraded forests in the area also play an important role in biodiversity.

Millington is echoed by Chen Shengliang, a biologist at Chongqing Environmental Protection Bureau in southwest China. "The rapid growth of single species of jatropha trees could inhibit other plants such as grasses," Chen told SciDev.Net. Liu Xuehua, an associate professor of environment at Tsinghua University, adds that land classed as idle is often not empty land, and can be home to diverse undomesticated species.

To cope with potential risks, Millington recommends that environmental assessment is carried out to distinguish high biodiversity areas from low biodiversity areas that are suitable for jatropha trees or other biofuel plants . The workshop organiser, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) ?which became the Ministry of Environment this week (1 5 March) at the annual plenary meeting of the National People's Congress ?announced earlier this month (6 March) that it is initiating a major research programme to evaluate the impacts of climate change on national biodiversity. In addition, according to a paper published by scientists at the University of California in Berkeley in the Journal of Environmental Economics and Management last week (10 March), China's carbon dioxide emissions are growing faster than previously estimated.

The country's annual growth rate of carbon emissions between 2004 and 2010 could be more than 11 per cent, instead of the 2.5? per cent growth predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

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