

NGO recommendations for a sustainable EU bioeconomy

In 2012, the EU released the Communication, “Innovating for Sustainable Growth: A Bioeconomy for Europe”, which is now in the process of being updated. The bioeconomy* is an increasing part of the environmental narrative as it includes agriculture, forestry, fisheries and the products provided by these sectors. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the use of biomass as a substitute for fossil energy and products, with the aim of mitigating climate change. In some cases this has led to more instead of less emissions. NGOs, scientists and policy-makers are therefore raising questions about the true potential of a ‘bioeconomy’, as well as the risks and trade-offs, in the context of long-term climate goals.

Of most concern is that **the growing bioeconomy is already increasing demand for land, fresh water and biomass**, with associated detrimental impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity and people. It is also reducing the amount of carbon which is being sequestered and stored by natural carbon sinks.

The bioeconomy should contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals which emphasise the importance of food security, clean water, responsible consumption and production, climate action and sustainable land and water management.

‘Bio’ is not necessarily better than fossil. This can only be achieved if the following principles are met:

Climate

The bioeconomy must mitigate climate change globally and consider the nearing climate tipping points. This includes the role of carbon stocks and carbon sequestration by forests and soils including peatlands. If these are ignored, the bioeconomy risks resulting in higher net-greenhouse gas emissions than a fossil-based economy. Research needs to be carried out to determine if and where the different sectors of the bioeconomy can contribute to climate change mitigation.

Planet

The bioeconomy relies on limited natural resources, and cannot deliver the same amount of resources as a fossil economy; this limit needs to be acknowledged and respected. The first steps need to be to reduce demand, focus on more scalable solutions, and ensure the most efficient use of the limited biomass resource.

People

The bioeconomy needs to have positive impacts on people. The bioeconomy must help achieve a world in which human rights (including land security and workers' rights) are respected and strengthened, and in which people have access to clean water and adequate nutrition.

Environment

Local and global ecosystems must not suffer in the name of the bioeconomy. To create a sustainable bioeconomy, European agriculture, forestry, soil and fishery policies need to be reformed to help halt global biodiversity and habitat loss and degradation, including forests and wetlands.

Waste reduction

The bioeconomy should follow the waste hierarchy and cascading use principles. To deliver the potential waste reduction benefits, all bio-materials should also be biodegradable under natural conditions without releasing harmful residues.

Transparency

Efforts to raise public awareness about the bioeconomy must include information about the risks as well as the benefits. Any public promotion must be transparent and based on facts, for example it must be clear that consuming biomass is not a zero-impact activity as it increases the need for a precious and limited resource.



*The 2012 EU Communication "Innovating for Sustainable Growth: A Bioeconomy for Europe" defines the bioeconomy as "the production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value added products, such as food, feed, bio-based products and bioenergy" <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2012:0060:FIN>