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90 Scientists Urge Congress Not to 'Cook the Books' in CO2 Accounting for Biofuels, Other Bioenergy Sources

PR Newswire

Concerns Expressed About Treatment of Bioenergy Sources in U.S. House and Senate Climate/Energy Bills; Improper Accounting Could Lead to Large-Scale Destruction of Forests, Undercutting of Other Climate Change Gains.

WASHINGTON, May 24 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Ninety of America's leading scientists today urged U.S. House and Senate leaders to make sure that any climate/energy bill or regulation accurately accounts for carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions when it comes to bioenergy, including biofuels such as ethanol.

In the letter to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, U.S. Majority Leader Harry Reid, and key Obama Administration officials, the scientists caution that ignoring the carbon impact of bioenergy can actually lead to increases in greenhouse gas emissions because not all forms of bioenergy produce less carbon dioxide pollution than fossil fuels. They write: "Replacement of fossil fuels with bioenergy does not directly stop carbon dioxide emissions from tailpipes or smokestacks. Although fossil fuel emissions are reduced or eliminated, the combustion of biomass replaces fossil emissions with its own emissions (which may even be higher per unit of energy because of the lower energy to carbon ratio of biomass)."

"There may be a public perception that all biofuels and bioenergy are equally good for the environment and are all lower in carbon emissions than fossil fuels, but that's not true," said Dr. William Schlesinger, president of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, one of the scientists who signed the letter. "Many produce just as much or more carbon pollution than oil, gas, and coal. If our laws and regulations treat high-carbon-impact bioenergy sources, like today's corn ethanol, as if they are low-carbon, we're fooling ourselves and undercutting the purpose of those same laws and regulations."

According to the scientists, what the United States decides to do in terms of accounting for bioenergy will have major repercussions around the globe. "U.S. laws will also influence world treatment of bioenergy. A number of studies in distinguished journals have estimated that globally improper accounting of bioenergy could lead to large-scale clearing of the world's forests."

Failure to properly account for bioenergy CO2 emissions could seriously undermine other efforts to address climate change, the scientists warn. "Many international treaties and domestic laws and bills account for bioenergy incorrectly by treating all bioenergy as causing a 100% reduction in emissions regardless of the source of the biomass. ... Under some scenarios, this approach could eliminate most of the expected greenhouse gas reductions during the next several decades ..."

The letter from the scientists cautions decision makers about the basic mistake that biomass is "carbon neutral," explaining: "Clearing or cutting forests for energy, either to burn trees directly in power plants or to replace forests with bioenergy crops, has the net effect of releasing otherwise

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sequestered carbon into the atmosphere, just like the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. That creates a carbon debt, may reduce ongoing carbon uptake by the forest, and as a result may increase net greenhouse gas emissions for an extended time period and thereby undercut greenhouse gas reductions needed over the next several decades."

For the full list of the 90 scientists and the text of the joint letter, go to <http://216.250.243.12/90scientistsletter.pdf>.

SOURCE Dr. William Schlesinger, Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies

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