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Is biodiesel green – or greenwash?



At present, Government policy in the UK and in Europe strongly encourages the adoption of biodiesel as a means of reducing the carbon footprint of the transport industry. But Bob Sturgess, Managing Director of Abbey Fuelcards, believes there is strong evidence to question the validity of biodiesel as a green option.

Biodiesel is a diesel-equivalent processed fuel derived from biological sources, such as plants and other *living* forms, as opposed to fossil fuels (derived from the fossilized remains of dead plants and animals).

In theory, fuels made from plants can reduce the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by cars and trucks: Plants absorb carbon as they grow, and it is released again when the fuel is burnt. Biodiesel is biodegradable and non-toxic and typically produces about 60% less net lifecycle carbon dioxide emissions. And thus, on the face of it, may be seen to provide a clear-cut benefit.

However, emissions of the smog forming hydrocarbon are 35% greater from biodiesel than from petroleum-based diesel, and emissions of nitrogen oxide are also higher. But to see the full picture it is important to look at the sourcing of biodiesel – and it is here that the problems really lie.



Tropical deforestation

A Sustainability Report by the Swiss Bank Sarasin in July 2006 placed “the present limit for the environmentally and socially responsible use of biofuels at roughly 5% of current petrol and diesel consumption in the EU and US.”¹ Beyond that level, the production of fuel begins to compete directly with the production of food – resulting in rising food prices, and food scarcity in poorer countries.

Even more problematic, however, is that whilst biodiesel can be created from many crops, for example, barley, rapeseed, maize and wheat, production will naturally gravitate towards the most efficient and cost-effective source – which is palm oil.

Already this new market for palm oil has stimulated a massive expansion of tropical deforestation in Malaysia and Indonesia, and as the forests are cut down, the carbon in both the trees and the peat they grow on turns into carbon dioxide. A study by the Dutch scientific consultancy Delft Hydraulics found that the production of every tonne of palm oil causes 33 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions.² This is 10 times worse than petroleum.

Thus when the effect of sourcing biodiesel (from the most efficient and cost effective source) is included in the equation, the evidence suggests that far from reducing the carbon footprint of transport, increasing the use of biodiesel may *accelerate* climate change.

Immediate positive impact

I believe that there are other, better ways towards a greener transport industry – and that the use of fuelcards, such as those provided by Abbey, offers one way that fleet managers and drivers can immediately begin to reduce their carbon footprint.



For example, Abbey's fuelcard services include a free monthly report which includes the fuel consumption and MPG data from which fleet managers can work out the carbon footprint of each of their vehicle.

Additionally, with a weekly fuel price that applies nationwide and is up to 2-3p below pump prices, there is no need for drivers to drive around searching for the best fuel price. This helps to reduce fuel consumption, and protects Abbey cardholders from potentially costly regional price variations.

Furthermore, the extensive network of Abbey sites makes it easy for drivers and managers to plan fuel stops that do not take them out of their way, thereby again saving valuable time and unnecessary fuel consumption.

And with the availability of Abbey site locators in numerous formats – including sms messaging, printed directory, satnav, and online – finding a convenient forecourt for re-fuelling is also easy and quick, whether in the office or out on the road.

For more information on how Abbey Fuelcards can help reduce your carbon footprint,

call Abbey on 0845 055 1695, or email: sales@abbey-fuelcards.co.uk

or visit: www.abbey-fuelcards.co.uk.



NOTE TO EDITORS

Abbey fuelcards is a leading fuel solutions provider and authorised agent of Texaco, Shell, Diesel Direct and UK Fuels. Established for over 15 years, Abbey fuelcards provide an unrivalled combination of service, savings and security for fleet and owner/driver vehicle refuelling throughout the UK.

Designed in the UK to meet the needs of UK organisations, Abbey fuelcards offer customers dedicated personal account management and innovative online tools for round-the-clock account administration, cost control and card protection. Abbey fuelcards uniquely include both contract and 'pay as you go' payment options.

Abbey fuelcards are one of the few remaining totally independent fuelcard companies and is wholly owned by its Managing Director Bob Sturgess who has over 20 years experience in offering a range of on the road refuelling options and associated services to commercial road transport operators.

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