

# Water experts worry biofuel will crowd out food crops

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**STOCKHOLM, Sweden:** Biofuel took center stage at a weeklong conference on the world's water supply this week, with experts warning it could pose more problems than solutions in the fight against climate change.

The message from the Stockholm meeting ending Friday was clear: increasingly strained by floods and drought, the world's water reserves are better spent on food than fuel.

"You can live with less energy but not with less food," said Suhas Wani, an Indian scientist who spoke at the World Water Week.

Demand for biofuels, such as ethanol made from corn or sugarcane, is surging as the world tries to wean itself of the fossil fuels blamed for global warming.

Although biofuels are considered a green alternative, scientists warned that business leaders and policy-makers were ignoring the side effects.

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With the world's population expected to reach 9 billion by 2050, the International Water Management Institute projects the water needed for food production will grow by up to 90 percent by then, unless water is used more efficiently.

Higher demand for biofuel will put even more stress on already strained water resources, said Johan Kuylenstierna, project director of the World Water Week.

"You get a competition situation between food production and biofuel production," he said.

Many delegates said that issue has been overlooked in industrial countries that don't suffer from water shortages, but are worried about fuel for their cars.

However, others say surging demand for biofuels is actually helping poor agricultural countries by boosting the prices of farm goods.

"Decades of declining agricultural prices have been reversed thanks to the growing use of biofuels," said Christopher Flavin, head of the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based environmental research agency.

"Farmers in some of the poorest nations have been decimated by U.S. and European subsidies to crops such as corn, cotton and sugar," Flavin said in a statement. "Today's higher prices may allow them to sell their crops at a decent price."

In Stockholm, delegates warned that the greenhouse gas reductions associated with a switch from fossil fuels to biofuels could be offset as new land is cleared to make room for the crops.

"In tropical areas that often means cutting down forests, which in turn releases CO<sub>2</sub>," Kuylenstierna said. "But apart from that it also has a negative effect on biodiversity."

The Stockholm Water Week brought together U.N. agency representatives and professionals from more than 130 countries to discuss the world's water needs and sources.

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