

## **What Does Heating Homes in New York City with Biodiesel Have to do with Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon?**

Many of us think we're doing the climate and the environment a big favor when we consider meeting our liquid fuel needs through biodiesel. I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but it's time to think again.

Agribusiness is seeing dollar signs as cities and states across the country consider using biodiesel to fuel municipal vehicle fleets and heat homes and businesses. In New York City, over a million households depend on petroleum heating oil to stay warm every winter. Legislation currently wending its way through City Council proposes adding biodiesel to future supplies.

But where does this biodiesel come from and at what environmental cost?

Proponents of agrofuels have plugged biodiesel as a renewable and environmentally friendly alternative to petroleum, but the unfortunate reality is that America and Brazil's industrial-scale soybean farms devour and destroy enormous quantities of non-renewable and irreplaceable resources. Whether in Iowa or the Amazon, powering the machines that plow, plant, harvest, cast fertilizers, spray pesticides, and pump irrigation water is energy intensive and the fossil fuels consumed by on-farm operations release significant quantities of greenhouse gases and toxic air emissions.

Adding to soybean agriculture's formidable fossil fuel tally, large amounts of natural gas are needed to produce the nitrogen based fertilizers that promote their growth. These fertilizers break down in fields releasing nitrous oxides, a global warming agent hundreds of times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>. When these fertilizers leach from farm fields they poison drinking water and ravage marine ecosystems. Run-off from Midwestern farm fields ends up in the Gulf of Mexico where it contributes to a New Jersey-size "dead zone" almost entirely absent of marine life.

A toxic rainbow of pesticides are sprayed on soybeans in an effort to combat weeds and insects. Making matters worse, 91 percent of the US soybean acreage planted in 2007 was genetically engineered to tolerate herbicides, a development that has boosted glyphosate applications several fold. Glyphosate, a powerful weed killer, is the third most common cause of pesticide illness in farm workers; exposure has been linked to rare cancers, miscarriages, and premature births.

And to top of the bad news, every acre of food diverted for fuel requires that another acre be planted to grow the missing food. In the case of Brazil, this virtually guarantees the continued destruction of the Amazon as rainforest gives way to soybean monocultures. A process which not only destroys valuable wildlife habitat, but also releases enormous quantities of greenhouse gases that intact rainforest normally retains and captures. (For a grassroots perspective on agroenergy in Brazil read the Oakland Institute's latest report, "Food & Energy Sovereignty Now: Brazilian Grassroots Position on Agroenergy".)

Using biodiesel would result in serious consequences for our health and the environment and communities are pushing back with a straightforward solution. By simply switching to ultra low sulfur diesel heating oil, a fuel standard already mandated for on-road vehicles, we can dramatically improve the quality of the air we breathe daily while reducing oil consumption through improved furnace efficiency. And we can do it without raising the cost of home heating or depending on unsustainable and environmentally destructive biodiesel!

If you live in the New York City area and want to get involved please visit [www.habitatmap.org](http://www.habitatmap.org) to find out how you can make a difference.

