

A SWEETER DEAL: How a fuel supplier set a new standard for sugar cane workers

Three years ago, renewable fuels supplier Greenergy decided to tackle the lack of an international standard for sustainable bioethanol by devising its own. Now, more than 5,000 miles from the firm's head office in Britain, workers in the field in Brazil are reaping the benefits

In many regions of Brazil, sugar mills are the only significant employer and underpin the local economy. They provide the bioethanol that powers most of Brazil's cars and makes up an ever-increasing percentage of what's in your own petrol tank. Bioethanol is a multi-billion dollar, global concern attracting vast investment.

Yet, back in the fields, some long-standing practices still remain. At a mill where sugar cane is still harvested by hand, workers

set fire to the cane to remove the leaves so it can be hacked more easily with a machete. The process produces hazardous smoke as well as greenhouse gas emissions.

Now, though, times are changing. Thanks to a self-starting initiative at the head office of British biofuel supplier Greenergy and to the positive response of its Brazilian suppliers, a mill has agreed to accelerate its plans to phase out burning, moving instead to mechanised harvesting in line with legislative requirements.



In the fast-growing bioethanol industry, Greenergy is working hard to phase out some environmentally unfriendly practices such as burning sugar cane (*above left*), and is committed to ensuring workers' rights are protected (*above right*)

Elsewhere, other initiatives are underway. Another mill has agreed to switch from a non-selective herbicide to less harmful, specific-purpose products. A further mill has invested in personal protective equipment held in the chemical storerooms.

For Greenergy, the catalyst for change was the British government's Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation (RTFO), a law that requires UK suppliers of road fuel to include a mandated percentage of renewable fuel in every →

“ WE’RE NOT IN SUSTAINABILITY TO PAY LIP-SERVICE TO THE CONCEPT: WE’RE BACKING UP THE IDEAL WITH REAL ACTION TO BRING REAL BENEFITS ”

tank. Greenergy, a burgeoning fuels supplier founded on sustainability principles, decided that the government had fallen short by not including criteria for determining whether sugarcane biofuel – the source of most of Greenergy’s bioethanol – was truly sustainable as well as simply renewable. So Greenergy, working with organisations such as ProForest, WWF Brazil and UTZ Certified, developed a set of criteria of its own.

The result was a 30-page document of sustainability criteria based on the RTFO requirements, covering everything from carbon conservation to land rights and community relations. Greenergy spent 2007 field-testing its new standard on-site in Brazil, before publishing it as an open document and rolling it out to its supplier mills.

After much dialogue, action plans for improvement were hammered out and third-party audits were booked. Greenergy took a carrot-and-stick approach from the outset, covering the costs of the auditing and support processes while stressing a firm stance towards non-compliers.

The standards are exacting. Field workers must have their

contracts verified independently to ensure compliance with national law on workers’ rights. High conservation value areas must be identified and incorporated into all future development plans and operations.

Evidence must be gathered



Greenergy insists on compliance with workers’ rights legislation

to show that newly-planted land can ‘pay back’ the carbon debt of converting it within ten years. Child workers under 16, unless they’re official apprentices or family members on family farms, are banned.

The uptake has been impressively rapid. Some mills have had far-reaching sustainability programmes in place for some time, but at others the approach is less formalised. “We embrace those mills that are further ahead in the process and support others



Sugarcane suppliers must also protect biodiversity by setting aside land to form nature reserves with native trees

in putting together the necessary change,” says Greenergy’s chief executive, Andrew Owens. “But if significant non-conformances are found that the mill is unwilling to address, we take our business elsewhere. We’re not in sustainability to pay lip-service to the concept: we’re backing up the ideal with real action so that people experience real benefits.”

In Brazil, where mill workers are cooling off in new sun shelters, where others are checking fire extinguishers on all transport

and machinery, and where Permanent Preservation Areas are being established to reforest local areas with native trees, those real benefits are making themselves more apparent every day. ■

Greenergy
www.greenergy.com
 198 High Holborn
 London WC1V 7BD

