

Round Table on Responsible Soy suffers setbacks but intensifies EU lobby

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Blog by Corporate Europe Observatory - The Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS), a much criticised initiative for the certification of soy as "responsible", has stepped up its lobbying to be included under the EU's Renewable Energy Directive to certify "sustainable agrofuels". The RTRS' lobby efforts are now facing setbacks as an important Brazilian player has left the RTRS and the Dutch government seems to be having second thoughts about "responsible" soy. The RTRS was so far financed principally by the Dutch government.

The Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS), a much criticised initiative for the certification of soy as "responsible", has stepped up its lobbying to be included under the EU's Renewable Energy Directive to certify "sustainable agrofuels". This would give RTRS-approved soy, much of which would be produced in unsustainable and damaging monoculture farming, the EU's seal of approval in the context of the EU 10% agrofuels target. But the RTRS' lobby efforts are now facing setbacks as an important Brazilian player has left the RTRS and the Dutch government seems to be having second thoughts about "responsible" soy. The RTRS was so far financed principally by the Dutch government.

The RTRS lost one of its key members this week when the Brazilian Association of Vegetable Oil Industries ABIOVE announced they would leave. ABIOVE has disappeared from the RTRS membership list, but according to TraceConsult, "ABIOVE will not go public with this information as they do not intend to discredit the RTRS." [1] Another important RTRS member, APROSOJA, representing large Brazilian soy producers, already left last year because of the 'deforestation clause' included in the round table's basic set of Principles and Criteria. As TraceConsult points out, "With APROSOJA defecting already last year and ABIOVE tip-toeing out now, the world's second largest soy producing country, Brazil, is hardly represented in the RTRS any longer." It is no coincidence that ABIOVE, also this week, has announced its own certification: SOJA PLUS. The objectives of SOJA PLUS are clear: an even cheaper and simpler certification system to repair the damaged image of Brazilian soy producers.

Apart from losing Brazilian members, the RTRS suffered another blow last week, when the Dutch government decided to reject a 68 million euro funding proposal on 'sustainable trade' initiatives, which included the RTRS. The funding application came from the two Dutch NGOs that drive the RTRS in Europe, WWF and Solidaridad. [2]

Meanwhile, the RTRS has formed a working group to promote that the RTRS will be accredited by the European Commission under the Renewable Energy Directive as a qualified certification scheme to certify 'sustainable' agrofuels. This, however, would require a major overhaul of the RTRS deforestation clause, which as it is now does not come close to meet the EU criteria on this matter. [3]

Another RTRS member, Patagonia Bioenergia, has hired one of Brussels' most controversial PR agencies, Burson Marsteller, to set up meetings with Members of European Parliament. Laetitia Bourgeix of Burson Marsteller wrote to several MEPs on behalf of Federico Pochat, CEO at Patagonia Bioenergia S.A and Executive Director of CARBIO (Argentinean Chamber of Biofuels) to arrange meetings in mid-February. Bourgeix mentioned that Mr Pochat would like to discuss "... aspects of the Renewable Directive like default and actual values, sustainability criteria and trade issues". [4] "As a key player in the Argentinean biofuels industry and member of the Round Table of Responsible Soy (RTRS), he would like to explain that Argentinean biodiesel is one of the world's most competitive and sustainable biofuels, adhering to the highest international environmental standards", the Burson Marsteller lobbyist wrote.

This happens in a context of the EU agrofuels debate entering a new stage of intensity, due to the upcoming Commission report on Indirect Land Use Change (ILUC). The report will assess how the broader land use impacts of agrofuels production influence the greenhouse gas balance of agrofuels.

Burson Marsteller is not the only consultancy that has been hired by the agrofuels industry to influence this debate: Edelman Public Affairs now works for the Malaysian palm oil giant Sime Darby Group, including arranging meetings with Members of European Parliament. Edelman's Noémie Papp wrote: "Sime Darby is closely following a number of EU policy initiatives in the fields of Environment, Agriculture and Energy linked to palm oil, sustainability, biofuels and biomass issues. Sime Darby is very committed to making a substantive contribution to these policy debates and believes that a sustained dialogue is key to achieving effective outcomes." [5]

And then there's Gplus, which still works for the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC). Weber Shandwick, moreover, is conducting a survey on behalf of Brazil's sugar barons united in UNICA, in order to "... help UNICA better understand the perceptions and expectations of key stakeholders, and will subsequently inform UNICA's communications strategy and input to policy debates in Europe." UNICA's lobby is also assisted by Cabinet DN, a Brussels-based consultancy full of former MEPs and EP staffers. Cabinet DN, which is not registered in the EU's lobbying transparency register, prominently highlights its policy of 'client confidentiality' on its website. [6]

[1] www.traceconsult.ch

[2] <http://www.viceversaonline.nl/2010/04/afvaller-solidaridad-boos-waar-is-...>

[3] personal communication with DG TREN

[4] email communication from Burson Marsteller to MEPs, January 2010

[5] email communication from Edelman to MEPs, April 2010

[6] <http://blog.brusselssunshine.eu/2010/03/cashing-in-on-secrecy.html>