

Adding Insult to Injury: First agrofuels and now biochar

From 12th to 15th September, the International Biochar Initiative, together with the Embrapa, is holding an international conference about biochar in Rio, where they will promote and lobby for carbon credits and subsidies for the large-scale production of biochar.

Five years ago, civil society warned that a huge new demand for crops for agrofuels would drive people from their lands, interfere with food production, damage soils and waterways and worsen, rather than “fix” climate change. Those predictions have, unfortunately, proven true. Yet governments have already mandated agrofuel use, and continue to prop up this destructive industry with massive subsidies.

Now comes biochar: advocates claim we should collect all manner of biomass – from agricultural and forestry wastes and residues (the same ones supposedly going to be made into cellulosic agrofuels), to animal manures, and including millions of hectares of monoculture energy crop plantations... and burn it all. Burning it without much oxygen will cause the biomass to “gasify”, creating both a gas and also charcoal. The gas can be used for agrofuels and the charcoal, which retains some of the biomass carbon, can be buried in soils to “sequester” the carbon. In fact, they claim that we can sequester as much as 12% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

But this would require HUGE quantities of biomass, including hundreds of millions of hectares of additional industrial monoculture plantations, further competing with peasant farmers for access to lands and water resources, further driving up food prices through competition for land, degrading soils, and further destroying forests and biodiverse ecosystems.

They claim this will sequester carbon, make soils more fertile, reduce N₂O emissions, prevent runoff of fertilizers and agrichemicals, and more. But these claims are based on very little – only a handful of peer-reviewed studies have been done, and often with mixed results. The biochar lobby group “International Biochar Initiative” insists that biochar is the same as “Terra Preta” the charcoal enriched soils in central Amazonia, created by indigenous peoples over thousands of years. Those soils are highly fertile as a result of the traditional practices and traditions of those peoples. But modern day biochar is not the same.

IN spite of the lack of knowledge, the IBI is pushing to have biochar made eligible for funding through carbon markets at the UN, in US climate legislation and in EU. Now they are here in Brazil to encourage Brazilian agribusiness to embrace their idea....

Don't fall for it!