

Exxon's algae biofuel ad banned over 'misleading' claims

Published: 24 March 2011

The UK Advertising Standards Authority has banned an algae biofuel TV advert by oil giant ExxonMobil because it overstated the technology's climate change mitigation potential.

Background

In December 2008, the EU struck a deal to satisfy 10% of its transport fuel needs from renewable sources, including biofuels, hydrogen and green electricity, as part of negotiations on its energy and climate package.

With traditional biofuels under fire for driving up food prices and wreaking environmental havoc, industrialists are stepping up research into algae as a sustainable alternative.

A TV ad for ExxonMobil featured a scientist talking about researching algae as a source of biofuel.

In the advert, a scientist said that "in using algae to form biofuels, we're not competing with the food supply, and they absorb CO₂, so they help solve the greenhouse problem as well".

But a complainant, who noted that any carbon dioxide absorbed by algae would be re-released back into the atmosphere when it was burned as fuel, objected that the ad misleadingly implied that the technology would reduce CO₂ levels.

ExxonMobil said that one of the advantages associated with second-generation biofuels like algae was their potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by partially replacing conventional transport fuels derived from hydrocarbons.

The company said this was because biofuel feedstocks absorbed CO₂ from the atmosphere and therefore the gases emitted during their combustion did not contribute to additional emissions.

ExxonMobil also cited a study by the European Commission's in-house research body, the Joint Research Centre, which they claimed proved that second-generation biofuels achieved greenhouse gas reductions on a comparative basis.

However, the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) considered that the ad's claim "went beyond stating the mitigation benefit".

According to the authority, the scientist's statement may mislead viewers to conclude that it was due to the absorption of CO₂ from the atmosphere that using algae to form biofuels helped "solve the greenhouse problem," by acting as a carbon sink.

The ASA said it understood that any CO₂ absorbed by algae would eventually be re-released into the atmosphere and concluded that the ad was misleading because it "overstated the technology's total environmental impact".

The banned TV ad has since been modified, but the scientist still states in the new advert that "[algae] also absorbs CO₂".

The UK authority previously upheld a complaint against an advert by Shell, another oil giant. It judged that the ad, which showed refinery chimneys sprouting flowers, misled viewers into thinking that the company uses all of its waste CO₂ to grow flowers.

Positions

The scientific committee of the **European Algae Biomass Association (EABA)** declared itself confident that "the commercial production of algae biofuels can be achieved with a positive carbon footprint and will represent a further important step in the direction of reducing CO₂ emissions in European transport, including aviation".

The EABA notes that the main advantages of algae biofuels include their potential for very high yields per hectare, quick growth, the avoidance of competition with food crops (no arable land is required), the recycling of waste water (which acts as nutrients) and the use of CO₂ emitted by other activities (which enhances the growth of algae).

"In this perspective, work is ongoing towards the objective of making algae biofuels an efficient means to reduce fossil CO₂ emissions from industrial and agricultural activities," it stated.

Links

Governments

- UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA): [ASA Adjudication on ExxonMobil UK Ltd](#) (9 March 2011)

Business & Industry

- ExxonMobil: [Algae biofuels](#)

Industry federations and trade unions

- European Algae Biomass Association (EABA): [Major Algae Scientists from the European Algae Biomass Association \(EABA\) underline the important potential of algae biofuels in terms of GHGs reduction](#) (23 February 2010)

Published on *EurActiv* (<http://www.euractiv.com>)

Source URL: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/climate-environment/exxons-algae-biofuel-ad-banned-misleading-claims-news-503443>