



ETC Group and Biofuelwatch
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White Roofs, Black Dust And Slippery Slopes: *Climate Engineers Seek Techno-fix As Global Negotiations Get Underway*

U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu's speech last week advocating painting rooftops and roadways white to reflect sunlight may be yet another attempt to test the international waters on the controversial subject of geoengineering.¹ "We need an unequivocal statement from the White House that the U.S. Government is not green-lighting geoengineering in the run-up to Copenhagen," said Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group, an Ottawa-based civil society organization monitoring new technologies. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meets in Denmark this December; UNFCCC subsidiary bodies are meeting this week and next in Bonn, Germany. "Benign as a new planetary paint job may appear, white rooftops may be the thin edge of the wedge – a technology that seems harmless but that opens the door to riskier geoengineering schemes," suggests Mooney.² Geoengineering refers to the intentional, large-scale manipulation of the earth's environment, primarily to counteract the effects of climate change.

Geoengineering is likely to be a hot topic behind the scenes – if not in open sessions – this week, as governments sit down to negotiate the post-Kyoto climate plan in Bonn. Rulemaking for planetary manipulation of the biosphere, using risky and untested technologies, is far more controversial than white paint suggests. Already, the draft negotiating texts for Copenhagen are replete with references to "enhancing technology" and "private sector cooperation." Advocates for climate techno-fixes are eager for financial and policy backing to move forward with real-world testing, even when critical decisions about technology oversight have yet to be made.

"Participants in the climate change negotiations must be aware of the slippery slope that opening the door to geoengineering will put them on. Once governments opt for a techno-fix to the climate change quagmire, it will be very difficult to refocus attention and resources on the need to cut emissions in wealthy countries," says Diana Bronson from ETC Group. "Politicians will be all too eager to say they have found a technological solution that allows us to keep driving our cars and consuming so-called 'cheap' food from heavily subsidized industrial agriculture. But these technologies have not been thoroughly examined, no governance mechanisms are in place to oversee them, and the public does not have access to the information it needs to distinguish science from 'green' whitewashing."

The geoengineering lobby (corporate and scientific) has gathered strength over the past year, free-riding on the growing – and legitimate – sense of urgency about the inadequacy of the multilateral response to the climate crisis. Unfortunately, democratic and multilateral decision-making risks being hijacked by those seeking to profit from speculative technofixes.

Biochar is a case in point. The highly influential International Biochar Initiative, which seeks funding via the Clean Development Mechanism, is a hybrid of academics and industry. Biochar, essentially charcoal from burning plant material under low oxygen conditions, is being touted as a new way to sequester carbon in soil.

Indeed, the draft negotiating texts for the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December already include support for biochar.³ “Even if biochar did sequester carbon effectively, which is far from clear, to contribute to mitigating climate change, we would need to char vast quantities of wood and plant matter, a demand that threatens the earth’s remaining biodiversity as well as communities living on so-called marginal lands,” argues Almuth Ernsting of Biofuelwatch.⁴ “Biochar, like other forms of black carbon, actually contributes to warming when it becomes airborne. In one recent Quebec field test, 30% of the biochar dust blew away during transport and as it was being spread over the fields and tilled into the soil.⁵ This hasn’t been thought through at all.”

“Given geoengineering’s potential for unilateral execution and unpredictable impacts, civil society groups need to demand clear answers from their governments. Peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, countries and communities who will be hardest hit by the climate crisis have the absolute right to participate in decision-making about what technologies get funded and deployed,” says Pat Mooney of ETC Group. “In the absence of basic democratic processes and multilateral debate, geoengineering is nothing short of geo-piracy.”

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¹ Steven Chu spoke at the St James's Palace Nobel Laureate Symposium in London held on May 26-28, 2009

² Painting surfaces white falls into a category of geoengineering technologies known as solar radiation management (SRM) that seeks to diminish the effects of climate change by reducing the amount of sunlight that reaches the earth, either by blocking it or reflecting it back to space. SRM aims to mitigate the effects of global warming without actually reducing the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere – addressing symptoms rather than cause. Other, bolder SRM geoengineering techniques include cloud whitening, space sunshades, sulphates in the atmosphere, space mirrors and genetically modified trees with extra shiny leaves.

³ Paragraph 134 in the draft text on long-term cooperative actions includes "...Consideration should be given to the role of soils in carbon sequestration, including through the use of biochar and enhancing carbon sinks in drylands." Available on the internet at: http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced_search/items/3594.php?rec=j&preref=600005243#beg

⁴ <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/>

⁵ *BlueLeaf: Solutions for the Environment, Preliminary Evaluation of Biochar in a Commercial Farming Operation in Canada*, 2009, p 8. Available on the internet at: http://www.blue-leaf.ca/main-en/report_a3.php