

EU auditors highlight need for more than one solution to road transport emissions

A new European Court of Auditors report shows the risks of relying only on electric vehicles for the future of road transport. As EU Biofuels Chain members write, Europe needs to be more open to a range of technologies.

The EU Biofuels Chain includes the following associations: CEFS (sugar manufacturers); CEPM (the maize chain); C.I.B.E. (sugar beet growers); COCERAL (trade in cereals, oilseeds, pulses, olive oil, oils and fats); Copa and Cogeca (farmers and agri-cooperatives); EBB (European Biodiesel Board); EOA (European Oilseed Alliance); ePURE (European renewable ethanol association); and FEDIOL (vegetable oil and protein meal industry).

Like a gambler putting all the chips on one number at the roulette table, the EU is betting everything on electric vehicles as the way to decarbonize road transport – and phasing out all other options, many of which already deliver results today. But a new [report](#) from the European Court of Auditors shows that bet may be premature at best, and counterproductive at worst.

The EU's main auditing institution has found that Europe's ambitions to rely on electric vehicles for road transport leave it vulnerable to long-term dependency on China and the U.S. for battery technology, and threaten its ability to meet goals for reducing CO₂ emissions from cars.

In other words, the consequences of banning new sales of internal combustion engine cars after 2035, without making allowances for cars that could run on carbon-neutral liquid fuels, are potentially serious.

Annemie Turtelboom, the Court of Auditors member who led the audit, summed it up well, according to [EURACTIV](#): “If you bet so heavily on electric cars and you know that you have a lack of raw materials under the ground, it means that you either will end up not meeting the 2035 goal or being dependent on third countries.”

That dependence could drive up the cost of electric vehicles, putting them out of reach of many citizens, who would be left out and not able to contribute to reducing emissions in Europe. Freedom of mobility would become increasingly a province of the wealthy. If the EU gets in a trade battle with China over cheap imports of electric vehicles, the problem could get even worse.

“We warned [in the report] that actually electric cars can become unaffordable for European citizens as you don't have the price editing completely in your hands,” Turtelboom said.

The Court of Auditors report also alludes to the environmental impacts of battery production. Instead of always extolling the virtues of ‘zero-emission vehicles’, Europe needs to take a more transparent and comprehensive approach to the real costs of producing these batteries and put in place an analysis of the full life cycle of battery production.

This is even more essential when these batteries are produced in countries where environmental and social standards are poor and material extraction is carried out with little concern for the environment. Calling cars running with such batteries ‘zero emission’ is misleading.

But this doesn't have to be the story line the EU follows. Instead of ignoring existing solutions, EU policymakers should take a diversified approach that is open to a range of technologies – from electrification, to sustainably produced renewable liquid fuels, to hydrogen.

The Green Deal's ambitions are justifiably high and, as international organizations like the IEA have repeatedly pointed out, will require all available solutions. Unlike some of those technologies that are still maturing or even on the drawing board, sustainable biofuels are already making a major impact on GHG emissions as the main source of renewable energy in transport.

Sustainable renewable ethanol and biodiesel are proven to significantly reduce greenhouse-gas emissions from the petrol, diesel and hybrid cars, vans, trucks, and buses that continue to predominate on Europe's roads. Sustainable biofuels deliver results now, without requiring new infrastructure investments. They are already making the biggest impact in displacing imported fossil fuel for road transport — and should be included in the EU's strategy for reducing dependence on Russian oil.

According to European Environment Agency's monitoring of the fuels put on the road in 2019, renewable ethanol consumption helped displace about 3.6 billion litres of fossil petrol, while biodiesel (FAME – Fatty Acid Methyl Esters) and Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) helped displace about 17.3 billion litres of fossil diesel.

Sustainable biofuels could also continue to genuinely reduce emissions from new cars for decades to come, but only if the EU transitions to a full life cycle of emissions, rather than counting just what comes out of vehicle tailpipes – a methodology that ignores all upstream emissions.

The stakes are high, as another European Court of Auditors [report](#) highlights vividly, and will be felt even before 2035 or 2040: the EU is in danger of missing its 2030 climate targets because EU Member States are having trouble achieving the goals in their national climate plans.

Given the findings of these Court of Auditors reports, it's fair to ask: Why is the EU the only place in the world that has decided to wager everything on EVs by 2035, even though it lacks the materials to produce them?

It's clear Europe still needs more than one solution to stop using fossil fuels in the transport sector at a socially acceptable cost. Even in the long-term future, the EU should take advantage of important synergies between renewable fuels and synthetic fuels, which could continue delivering emissions reductions in the cars that Europeans will continue to drive for many years to come.

Given the huge uncertainty of the EU's electric-only-strategy, as highlighted by the Court of Auditors, it is essential that biofuels are included in the list of carbon neutral fuels, and remain part of the solution to give Europe more flexibility to achieve its climate goals.

Otherwise, the EU risks losing big on its electric-car bet.

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