

# Calls for tighter rules on biofuels imports to root out palm oil fraud

**Investigations suggest a large share of ‘used’ cooking oil being imported could be wrongly labelled as demand outpaces supply**

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- Waste cooking oil was the main ingredient in the sustainable aviation fuel that powered the transatlantic flight by Virgin Atlantic last month. Photograph: Virgin Atlantic/EPA

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Tighter rules are needed to ensure that the imported “used” cooking oil that airlines hope will power cleaner flights is not in fact virgin palm oil, campaigners have warned.

About 80% of waste oil is imported to create biofuels that are mostly still used in cars, vans and lorries despite growing demand from aviation. About 60% of those imports come from China.

However, cases of fraud uncovered by investigations suggest a large share of imports could be wrongly labelled as waste instead of repurposed palm oil products. Crop-based biofuels, which were once seen as renewable, are now contributing to deforestation and worsening emissions.

A report for the Brussels-based NGO Transport & Environment (T&E) found that while European countries were trying to clamp down on crop-based biofuels, the resultant shift in demand for waste oil was outpacing supply.

Europe's consumption of used cooking oils has more than doubled since 2015, largely to fuel ground transport, and demand is expected to grow as airlines push for sustainable aviation fuel, or SAF. Waste cooking oil was the main ingredient in the SAF that solely powered a UK government-sponsored transatlantic flight by Virgin Atlantic last month.

T&E said there were serious concerns about the imports. Barbara Smailagic, a biofuels expert at the NGO, said: "Europe is being flooded with dodgy used cooking oil. European governments say it's almost impossible to stop virgin oils like palm being labelled as waste. We need greater transparency and a limit on imports to avoid used cooking oil simply becoming a backdoor for deforestation-driving palm oil."

Countries including Germany and Ireland are launching official investigations into fraud risks, while the European Commission has promised to investigate fraudulent Indonesian biodiesel.

While imports of palm oil biodiesel have dropped by almost 30%, derivatives of the oil labelled as "waste" or "residues" have increased, which T&E said still had significant environmental impacts.

Smailagic said: "Europe never tires of finding new things to burn. Sustainable biofuel feedstocks are extremely limited. We need to stop seeing biofuels as a panacea for our climate problem."

The report recommends that biofuels are phased out in favour of direct electrification for road transport, with any truly sustainable fuels reserved for aviation.

Airlines in the EU will be mandated to use at least 6% SAF in their overall fuel burn from the end of the decade and hope to use more, although production levels are still much lower than demand.

The UK has yet to create SAF at commercial volumes but the government hopes to have five plants under construction by 2025 and to mandate airlines to use 10% SAF by 2030.

Many environmental groups believe that only synthetic kerosene – made using green hydrogen and reducing carbon dioxide directly in production – is a truly sustainable aviation fuel, but concerns remain about the huge amounts of renewable energy required to create it.