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A Wednesday of warnings

What's more important—fuel for your car or food for your stomach? That's the question that finance minister P. Chidambaram and climate scientist R.K. Pachauri raised on Wednesday, at separate events at Singapore and Brussels, respectively.

Both blamed the US' accelerating diversion of maize to make the biofuel ethanol for shortages-led skyrocketing global food prices. Both added value to the hotting up debate on the manner in which the biofuel industry is growing at the cost of the food economy—with more serious implications for the developing countries.

Pachauri also said that while the US was the biggest producer of biofuels, mostly maize-based, the environment-friendliness of that route is being questioned. Chidambaram pointed to the "foolish-

ness" of diverting food into fuel. Both very valid issues.

Biofuels were initially seen as the panacea for both surging crude oil prices and heightened worries about the adverse climate impact of carbon emissions from the fossil fuel. Ethanol blending with petrol and diesel was taken up with zest by many countries from Brazil to China, apart from the US. (A policy-directed project has only met lukewarm success in India so far.) The EU, in fact, is proposing to set ambitious targets for 10% of power for transport to come from biofuel crops.

Significantly, the UK government has been warned not to abide by any such EU diktat earlier this week by its national scientific chiefs, present and former, before getting a detailed evaluation of the net carbon footprints of various kinds of biofuels.

That is the key—not only

from the emission angle, but also the food security view.

Technologies have not yet evolved enough for second generation biofuels such as cellulosic ethanol from non-food crops. But with crude oil at \$100 a barrel level, investments are escalating in first-generation substrates such as maize, edible oilseeds such as for palm oil, sugar cane, etc.

Coupled with a draining of global foodgrain stocks, thanks to droughts, higher costs of fertilizers and transport, the diversion of food crops into fuel has had a severe impact. Asian countries with teeming populations and a vast number of poor are banning exports and cutting import tariffs to maintain their supplies.

All this clearly points to the need to temper governments' fervour for policy diktats on biofuels. Definitely not before there's more clarity on which biofuels to adopt for a greener future—and on full stomachs.

*Is the biofuel story fading?
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