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Tanzania Suspends Biofuels Investments

By *PETE BROWNE*



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A flurry of foreign investment in jatropha for use as a biofuel feedstock has caused concern in Tanzania.

Reacting to mounting pressure from farmers and environmental groups citing concerns over food shortages, the Tanzanian government has reportedly suspended all biofuel investments in the country and halted land allocations for biofuel development.

“The government was asleep,” Esther Mfugale, the coordinator of biofuel production for Tanzania’s Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security and Cooperatives, was quoted as saying in an interview with The East African newspaper. “We have to stop and set out clear procedures for biofuel investments.”

This follows news of a pending report from Envirocare, an environmental and human rights organization in the country, on the impact of the jatropha industry in the country, which we highlighted last week.

An early version of the Envirocare study was apparently given to The East African newspaper.

“This report has caused controversy in Tanzania,” said Abdallah Mkindi, the author of the study. “The Tanzanian government has no policy or framework governing biofuel developments, and this is central to issues surrounding the biofuel industry in Tanzania.”

Mr. Mkindi stressed, however, that while the newspaper reports on the contents of the study have been broadly accurate, the document “is still a work in progress,” he said. “It has yet to be finalized and is due for publication within the next two weeks.”

Action Aid, an international anti-poverty agency, is also researching the impacts of biofuel production on food security in Tanzania. Eloias Mtinda, an agency spokesman, said he met recently with government and industry representatives to discuss the issue.

“All parties need to work together on this issue,” said Mr. Mtinda. “Meanwhile, no arable crop land should be made available for biofuel production until a framework is developed to monitor the industry.”