

Berkeley Deserves Better than British Petroleum

BY HILLARY VIOLET LEHR



On Feb. 1 of this year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, and the CEO of British Petroleum (BP) held a giddy press conference announcing their plans to create a “moon-shot” for their generation. Under the auspices of “fighting” global warming, our university slipped into bed with the very perpetrators of the problem we now are offering to “solve.”

Actually, it is unclear whether or not BP’s plans to create the UC Berkeley Energy Biosciences Institute (EBI) are actually aimed at redressing climate change, especially since two proposed labs would focus on finding new means (including the use of genetically engineered micro-organisms) to extract additional fossil fuels. The non-oil focus of the lab is on plant-derived biofuels, the energy source that George W. Bush calls “the future.”

Here is where we need a reflective moment. It’s true that our society has engineered itself into this mess, and to a certain extent, we must engineer ourselves out of it. However, we also need to begin engineering *consciously*, by making space to investigate all safe sources of alternative energy and by taking our socio-environmental impacts seriously. By allowing the interests of a corporation to sway our focus and deprioritize the values of true sustainability in favor of BP’s standard of “green” we seriously compromise our university’s integrity.

A public university is responsible to the public. While the public may for the moment enjoy guilt-free unlimited driving, we would only do so if we ignore the effects of biofuel cultivation on the Global South. Anticipated biofuel consequences include widespread deforestation and diverted food agriculture that is putting corn in our gas tanks instead of in hungry bellies. Already, people in Mexico are rioting over the 600 percent increase in corn prices. People can’t afford tortillas. These sorts of problems will only increase with the expansion of corporate monocultures of biofuel crops as aided by the unjust policies of the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. These consequences (and how to avoid them) are what an independent university should be studying.

Our university has a responsibility to help the world, not to be corralled into a corporate guise to control the post-oil future.

One EBI lab is slated to have a “socio-environmental” element. This focus area lab would have the ability to publish research, but the findings would have no teeth. If a researcher discovered biofuel cultivation somehow increased climate change or skyrocketed world food prices, BP would have no obligation to heed the ethical stipulation of this research nor alter its destructive behavior in the slightest.

The true violence of the EBI initiative lies in its own unbridled optimism: in the tacit assumptions of the ability of Western technology, government, development, and leadership to “save” yet another part of the world. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is burning genetically modified corn and fighting to stay alive in a hegemony that doesn’t listen to their ideas, their demands or their desperate pleas. Amazingly, EBI protagonists call the plan a “second Manhattan project.” Do we need another atom bomb to learn that we are not always right? Our university has a responsibility to help the world, not to be corralled into a corporate guise to control the post-oil future.

UC Berkeley can do this right. We have the resources and the brainpower to pursue true sustainable energy use. We could focus on energy demand reduction, large-scale public transportation innovation, and renewable energy sources such as solar, wind and tidal. Awareness of global climate change is here. People are ready to take individual action. Our job should be to accommodate the public, not corporations profiteering from an illegal war.

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Resources:

Stop BP-Berkeley: <www.stopbp-berkeley.org>
The Phoenix Coalition to Free the UC:
<www.FreeTheUC.org>