

The European Commission unveiled a new bioeconomy strategy on Thursday (11 October), saying it could reduce the EU's dependence on fossil resources while underlining the ecological limitations of Europe's farming and forestry sector.

The EU's new bioeconomy strategy will contribute to addressing global challenges such as rising population and climate change, Commission vice-president Jyrki Katainen said as he presented a 14-point action plan in Brussels.

"The bioeconomy can turn algae into fuel, recycle plastic, convert waste into new furniture or clothing or transform industrial by-products into bio-based fertilisers," the Commission said in a statement.

It can also contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. For example, the use of 1 ton of wood instead of 1 ton of concrete in construction can lead to 2.1-ton carbon dioxide reduction, Katainen pointed out.

Other potential applications include bioplastics that can decompose and prevent ocean pollution. "We have already decided to create a standard for bio-degradable plastic," Katainen said, explaining that current bioplastics may be biodegradable but don't necessarily decompose, meaning they create micro plastics as they degrade.

"And that is not sustainable at all," he said.

"Partial solution"

But "the bioeconomy alone will not do the trick," Katainen stressed, saying the strategy offers only "a partial solution to the challenges the planet is facing."

The EU strategy will focus on scaling up European industries, with a dedicated €100 million investment plan to bring bio-based innovations closer to the market. This will include pilot actions for the development of bioeconomies in rural, coastal and urban areas, for example on waste management or carbon farming.

The EU's updated bioeconomy strategy also recognises the potential damages of intensive agriculture and forestry by putting in place an EU-wide monitoring system to track progress in those areas.

Katainen admitted that the Commission initiative was driven mainly by outside demands.

"The bioeconomy - it wasn't our idea initially. It was industry, member states and NGOs who asked us to do things which will improve the use of bio resources in a sustainable manner. And now we are delivering."

Asked about the use of bio fertilisers, Katainen replied this was indeed one of the areas the Commission wants to develop. "I would really like to see manure used as a feedstock for fertilisers. It is part of the circular economy philosophy. And if we manage to do it, it will have a significant impact on waste-based fertiliser production and use."

The strategy doesn't however touch significantly on bioenergy, which has come under fire in recent years for contributing to deforestation and rising emissions across the globe.

Bioenergy is "the overlooked giant of the renewable energy field," the International Energy Agency said in a new report published on Monday (8 October).

"Its share in global total renewables consumption is about 50% today - as much as hydro, wind, solar and all other renewables combined," said Fatih Birol, executive director of the IEA.

And their expansion is expected to continue in the next five years, covering 40% of global energy consumption growth, according to the IEA's Renewables 2018 market analysis and forecast report.

Source: euractiv.com