

RSB Approach to Land-Use Change

1. Background

Land-use change (LUC) is observed when a given area is being converted from one type of utilization to a different one (e.g. conversion of a natural forest to a farm). Land-use change is often associated with the conversion of the area or the removal of existing vegetation to make way for the new utilization.

There can be land-use change from a natural area towards a man-exploited area (e.g. from forest or wetlands to farm or, industrial site), from a man-exploited area towards another type of man-exploited area (e.g. from a plantation to a farm), or from a man-exploited area towards a natural area (e.g. set-aside land, reforestation, etc.).

Land-use change poses a number of risks to the environment and people, such as the destruction of important habitats for wildlife, the loss of certain ecosystem services, and the release of carbon contained in the soil or associated vegetation. Thus, it is important for credible standards to address land-use change and define the conditions under which it is acceptable or not.

Two categories of land-use change exist: 1) Direct land-use change (dLUC) is often required to make an area suitable for biomass production and processing (e.g. a natural grassland converted into a plantation or a milling unit); 2) Indirect land-use change (iLUC), also referred to as displacement or leakage effect, is caused by the diversion of a given commodity towards biofuel or biomaterial production, which leaves a gap in the supply of the product this commodity was formerly used for. This gap is compensated through market mechanisms by converting additional land outside the project boundary, thus provoking similar environmental and social impacts as those described above.

2. How RSB addresses direct land-use change

The RSB adopts a rigorous approach to address negative impacts caused by direct land-use change through a comprehensive set of Principles & Criteria:

- Principle 2 requires any project to obtain the free prior and informed consent of local communities.

- Principle 3 describes the minimum required greenhouse gas savings and methodology whereby greenhouse gas emissions are accounted for, including those related to land-use change.

- Principle 6 requires that operators located in regions of food security demonstrate a positive impact on local food security and do not divert arable land towards energy use.

- Principle 7 prohibits the conversion of lands considered important for rare or endangered species or that provide ecosystem services to local communities. The RSB maintains a list of areas which cannot be converted, such as High Conservation Value (HCV) Areas, Key Biodiversity Areas, IUCN Protected Areas I to IV, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and Natura 2000 site.
- Principle 8 requires operators to implement good practices to maintain or improve soil health through prevention of erosion for instance.
- Principle 12 requires all lands used for biomass production and processing to be acquired through fair and transparent transaction with local stakeholders.

3. How RSB addresses indirect land-use change

As described above, RSB Principles & Criteria comprehensively address the social and environmental impacts caused by direct land-use change within the boundary of the project. However, indirect land-use change is a more complex issue rooted in macro-economic mechanisms, which are somewhat beyond the reach of the individual operators primarily targeted by the RSB Standard. Indirect land-use change is generally caused by the cumulative impacts of thousands of operators diverting commodity towards a different use, thus making it difficult to capture at the level of individual projects.

However, a growing consensus exists around biomass cultivation practices, which could be implemented at the individual operator level and reduce the risk of displacement and indirect land-use change. These practices are best described in the LIIB (Low Indirect Impact Biofuels^[1]) methodology, which is being developed by WWF International, Ecofys and EPFL.

In March 2013, the RSB Assembly of Delegates adopted the LIIB methodology and offers an extra “low indirect impact biofuel” claim to operators willing to demonstrate compliance with LIIB-approved biomass cultivation practices. The RSB is currently adapting its compliance and certification process accordingly.

4. Conclusion

The RSB offers a rigorous framework to address negative impacts caused by direct land-use change for biomass production and processing. It also provides an innovative and credible approach to reduce the risk of indirect land-use change through the LIIB approach. In addition, RSB always recognized the necessity for indirect impacts (incl. iLUC) to be addressed through policy and regulatory instruments. For instance, integrated land-use policies at the national and regional level that take into account several land uses and prioritize them (e.g. food, fiber, energy, conservation, etc.). Our goal is for operators to integrate policies and regulations with RSB’s strong framework to ensure they minimize their risks related to direct and indirect land use change.