

# The water footprint of bioenergy

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Edited by David Pimentel, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, and accepted by the Editorial Board April 20, 2009 (received for review December 12, 2008)

**All energy scenarios show a shift toward an increased percentage of renewable energy sources, including biomass. This study gives an overview of water footprints (WFs) of bioenergy from 12 crops that currently contribute the most to global agricultural production: barley, cassava, maize, potato, rapeseed, rice, rye, sorghum, soybean, sugar beet, sugar cane, and wheat. In addition, this study includes jatropha, a suitable energy crop. Since climate and production circumstances differ among regions, calculations have been performed by country. The WF of bioelectricity is smaller than that of biofuels because it is more efficient to use total biomass (e.g., for electricity or heat) than a fraction of the crop (its sugar, starch, or oil content) for biofuel. The WF of bioethanol appears to be smaller than that of biodiesel. For electricity, sugar beet, maize, and sugar cane are the most favorable crops [50 m<sup>3</sup>/gigajoule (GJ)]. Rapeseed and jatropha, typical energy crops, are disadvantageous (400 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ). For ethanol, sugar beet, and potato (60 and 100 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ) are the most advantageous, followed by sugar cane (110 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ); sorghum (400 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ) is the most unfavorable. For biodiesel, soybean and rapeseed show to be the most favorable WF (400 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ); jatropha has an adverse WF (600 m<sup>3</sup>/GJ). When expressed per L, the WF ranges from 1,400 to 20,000 L of water per L of biofuel. If a shift toward a greater contribution of bioenergy to energy supply takes place, the results of this study can be used to select the crops and countries that produce bioenergy in the most water-efficient way.**

sustainability | climate change | energy | biomass | natural resource use

In the coming decades humanity will face important challenges, not only to meet the basic human need for water (1, 2), but also to ensure that extraction of water from rivers, streams, lakes, and aquifers does not affect freshwater ecosystems performing ecological functions (3). With a world population of 9.2 billion by 2050, as projected by the United Nations (4), there are reasons for concern over whether the food and fiber needs of future generations can be met in regions with limited water resources (3, 5–8).

The scientific as well as the international political community often consider global change in relation to climate change. It is generally recognized that the emission of greenhouse gases is responsible for anthropogenic impacts on the climate system. To reduce emissions, a shift toward renewable energy, such as bioenergy, is heavily promoted. Other advantages of renewable energy are an increase in energy supply security, resource diversification, and the absence of depletion risks (9). The sources of bioenergy can be crops specifically grown for that purpose, natural vegetation, or organic wastes (10). Many of the crops used for bioenergy can also—alternatively, not at the same time—be used as food or feed. Biomass can be burnt to produce heat and electricity, but it can also be used for the production of bioethanol or biodiesel, which are biofuels that can displace fossil energy carriers in motor vehicles (11).

At present, the agricultural production of biomass for food and fiber requires ≈86% of worldwide freshwater use (12, 13). In many parts of the world, the use of water for agriculture competes with other uses, such as urban supply and industrial activities (14), although the aquatic environment shows signs of degradation and decline (1). An increase in demand for food in combination with a shift from fossil energy toward bioenergy puts additional pressure on freshwater resources. For the future,

scarcely any new land will be available so all production must come from the current natural resource base (15), requiring a process of sustainable intensification by increasing the efficiency of land and water use (16).

Globally, many countries explore options for replacing gasoline with biofuels (11). The European Union and the U.S. even have set targets for this replacement. When agriculture grows bioenergy crops, however, it needs additional water that then cannot be used for food. Large-scale cultivation of biomass for fossil fuel substitution influences future water demand (17). An important question is whether we should apply our freshwater resources to the production of bioenergy or to food crops. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that in 2007 alone, before the food price crisis struck, 75 million more people were pushed into undernourishment as a result of higher prices, bringing the total number of hungry people in the world to 923 million (18). Moreover, the FAO reports that biofuels increase food insecurity (19). The World Bank recognizes biofuel production as a major factor in driving up food prices. It estimates that 75% of the increase in food prices in the period from 2002–2008 was due to biofuels (20). The current financial crisis may diminish purchasing power and increase the risk of a drop in food intake. As a result, more people are likely to fall below the hunger threshold. Households may make decisions to have fewer meals or eat cheaper foods of lower nutritional value, decisions that can have particularly severe consequences for infants and children (21).

The replacement of fossil energy with bioenergy generates the need for detailed information on water requirements for this new energy source. A concept for the calculation of water needs for consumer products is the water footprint (WF) (12, 13, 22), defined as the total annual volume of fresh water used to produce goods and services for consumption.

The objective of this study is to give a global overview of the WF per unit of bioenergy [m<sup>3</sup>/gigajoule (GJ)], including heat, electricity, bioethanol, and biodiesel. This study covers the 12 main crops that together form 80% of global crop production. In addition, this study includes jatropha, a plant species often mentioned in the context of bioenergy. Research questions are: (i) what are the WFs (m<sup>3</sup>/GJ) for heat and electricity derived from the combustion of biomass per crop per country and (ii) what are the WFs (m<sup>3</sup>/GJ) for transport fuels (bioethanol and biodiesel) per crop per country. The study excludes organic wastes, such as manure or crop residues, biogas, and energy from algae. This study builds upon 2 earlier studies: one that estimated the WFs of a large variety of food and fiber products (12, 13), and one that estimated the WF of heat from biomass (23). This study

Author contributions: W.G.-L. and A.Y.H. designed research; W.G.-L. performed research; A.Y.H. contributed new reagents/analytic tools; W.G.-L., A.Y.H., and T.H.v.d.M. analyzed data; and W.G.-L. and A.Y.H. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission. D.P. is a guest editor invited by the Editorial Board.

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This article contains supporting information online at [www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/0812619106/DCSupplemental](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/0812619106/DCSupplemental).

refines the work of Hoekstra and Chapagain (13) by taking precise production locations into account for the calculation of crop water requirements and by using local estimates for the start of the growing season based on an analysis of when weather conditions at specific locations are most favorable. An additional refinement is that this study differentiates between blue and green water. This study also extends the study by Gerbens-Leenes, et al. (23), which focused on the WF of heat from biomass, to the WF of bioelectricity and biofuels.

**Bioenergy.** Energy derived from biomass is termed bioenergy. The FAO (24) defines biomass as material of organic origin, in nonfossilized form, such as agricultural crops and forestry products, agricultural and forestry wastes and by-products, manure, microbial matter, and industrial and household organic waste. Biomass is used for food or feed (e.g., wheat, maize, sugar), materials (e.g., cotton, wood, paper), or for bioenergy (e.g., maize, sugar, jatropha). Figure S1 shows that biomass can provide different forms of bioenergy: heat, electricity, and biofuels such as ethanol and biodiesel. First-generation biofuels are presently available biofuels produced using conventional technology, i.e., fermentation of carbohydrates into ethanol, and extracting and processing oil from oil crops into biodiesel. Biomass not only contains starch, sugar, and oil that can be processed into biofuel; it also contains large amounts of cellulosic matter. To date, the cellulosic fraction has been used for energy by burning it to provide heat and produce electricity. It is expected that these cellulosic fractions will form an attractive source for the production of next-generation biofuels. Next-generation biofuels are biofuels available in the future, produced using new technology, now under development, that aims to also convert cellulosic fractions from crops into biofuels, e.g., ethanol (25). In this way, biofuel produced per unit of crop can be increased substantially.

**WF.** The WF of a product is defined as the volume of freshwater used for production at the place where it was actually produced (13). In general, the actual water content of products is negligible compared with their WF, and water use in product life cycles are dominated by the agricultural production stage. The WF consists of 3 components: the green WF, the blue WF, and the gray WF (13). The green WF refers to rainwater that evaporated during production, mainly during crop growth. The blue WF refers to surface and groundwater for irrigation evaporated during crop growth. The gray WF is the volume of water that becomes polluted during production, defined as the amount of water needed to dilute pollutants discharged into the natural water system to the extent that the quality of the ambient water remains above agreed water quality standards.

**Crops Considered in This Study.** Globally, a limited number of crops determines total production. Theoretically, all crops can be used for bioenergy, but in practice some crops dominate production: sugar cane, sugar beet, maize, rapeseed, and soybean (25). Because this study aims to provide a global overview of the WFs of the main crops that can be used for bioenergy, it includes the 12 crops that contribute 80% of total global crop production. Table S1 shows these crops in decreasing order of annual production. Additionally, this study includes jatropha curcas, a tree species with seeds from which oil can be extracted (26).

The composition of biomass determines the availability of energy from its specific type, resulting in differences in combustion energy and options for biofuel production. This study includes 4 categories of biomass: starch crops [cereals (barley, maize, rice, rye, sorghum, and wheat) and tubers (cassava and potato)]; sugar crops (sugar beet and sugar cane); oil crops (rapeseed and soybean); and trees (jatropha).

**Table 1. Total weighted-global average WF for 13 crops providing electricity ( $\text{m}^3/\text{GJ}$ )**

Crop	$\text{m}^3$ per GJ electricity		
	Total WF	Blue WF	Green WF
Sugar beet	46	27	19
Maize	50	20	30
Sugar cane	50	27	23
Barley	70	39	31
Rye	77	36	42
Paddy rice	85	31	54
Wheat	93	54	39
Potato	105	47	58
Cassava	148	21	127
Soybean	173	95	78
Sorghum	180	78	102
Rapeseed	383	229	154
Jatropha*	396	231	165

It is assumed that not only crop yields, but total biomass yields are used for the generation of the electricity.

\*Average figures for 5 countries (India, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Guatemala).

## Results

**Crop Production, Crop Water Requirements, and Irrigation Requirements.** Some countries make a large contribution to global production. For example, Brazil produces 27% of globally available sugar cane; the U.S. has almost half of the global soybean production, 40% of the maize, and one quarter of the sorghum production; and China provides 18% of all wheat, one third of the paddy rice, one fifth of the potatoes, and 27% of the rapeseed production. Half of the global production of rye takes place in Russia and Germany, whereas Nigeria shows the largest contribution to cassava production. For other crops, such as sugar beet and barley, production is distributed more evenly among countries.

Irrigation is required at almost every crop location. The exceptions are sugar beet grown in Japan; maize from South Africa; wheat from Australia; cassava from Nigeria, Angola, Benin, Guinea, the Philippines, Vietnam and India; potato from Bangladesh, Peru, and Japan; sorghum from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, and Venezuela; and rapeseed from Bangladesh. In some countries crop water requirements are completely or almost completely accounted for by irrigation water. These crops and countries are sugar cane from Argentina (96%) and Egypt (92%); wheat from Argentina (100%), Kazakhstan (98%), and Uzbekistan (98%); potato and barley from Kazakhstan (100%); sorghum from Yemen (100%); and soybean from Brazil (95%). For the other crops and production locations, irrigation requirements are between these 2 extremes.

**The WF of Biomass.** WFs show large variations for similar crop types, dependent on agricultural production systems used and climate conditions. Table S2 shows extreme values of total and blue WFs per crop. Most total WFs show variations of a factor of 4 to 15, with 2 exceptions. These exceptions are the values for wheat and sorghum, with a difference of a factor of 20 and 47, respectively. Kazakhstan occurs 3 times as the country with the largest total and blue WF for a crop (barley, potato, and wheat).

**The WF of Heat and Electricity from Biomass.** Table 1 shows the total weighted global average WF for 13 crops providing electricity. It is assumed that not only crop yields, but total biomass yields are used for the generation of electricity. The largest difference of WF is found between jatropha and the sugar beet; the beet is almost 10 times more water efficient. The WF of heat is at all



**Table 2. Total weighted-global average WF for 10 crops providing ethanol and 3 crops providing biodiesel (m<sup>3</sup>/GJ), as well as their blue and green WF**

Crop	Total WF	Blue WF	Green WF	Total water	Blue water	Green water
Ethanol		m <sup>3</sup> per GJ ethanol			L of water per L of ethanol	
Sugar beet	59	35	24	1,388	822	566
Potato	103	46	56	2,399	1,078	1,321
Sugar cane	108	58	49	2,516	1,364	1,152
Maize	110	43	67	2,570	1,013	1,557
Cassava	125	18	107	2,926	420	2,506
Barley	159	89	70	3,727	2,083	1,644
Rye	171	79	92	3,990	1,846	2,143
Paddy rice	191	70	121	4,476	1,641	2,835
Wheat	211	123	89	4,946	2,873	2,073
Sorghum	419	182	238	9,812	4,254	5,558
Biodiesel		m <sup>3</sup> per GJ biodiesel			L of water per L of biodiesel	
Soybean	394	217	177	13,676	7,521	6,155
Rapeseed	409	245	165	14,201	8,487	5,714
Jatropha*	574	335	239	19,924	11,636	8,288

The table also shows the amount of water needed for a specific crop to produce 1 L of ethanol or 1 L of biodiesel.

\*Average figures for 5 countries (India, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Guatemala).

actual yields, which in many cases can be increased in the future without increasing water use per unit of product. This future yield increase means that in some cases WFs per unit of energy can be significantly lowered. For the efficiency of obtaining electricity or biofuels from biomass, we have made optimistic assumptions by taking theoretical maximum values or values that refer to the best available technology. These assumptions mean that the resulting WF figures are conservative.

**Sensitivities.** The results of this study are based on rough estimates of freshwater requirements in crop production and on theoretical maximum conversion efficiencies in the production of bioelectricity and biofuels. For the assessment of the WF of bioenergy, the study integrated data from several sources, each of which adds a degree of uncertainty. For example, the calculations using the FAO model CROPWAT (28) required input of meteorological data that are averages over several years rather than data for a specific year. The data presented thus do not reflect annual variations. Estimated crop water requirements are sensitive to the input of climatic data and assumptions concerning the start of the growing season. In the most extreme cases, this study found crop water requirements that were a factor of 2 different from earlier studies (12, 13, 27), whereas at other times the results were similar. The aspects mentioned above imply that results presented here are indicative. However, the differences in calculated WFs are so great that general conclusions with respect to the WF of bioethanol vs. the WF of biodiesel can be drawn and that conclusions also can be drawn about the relative WFs of different crops.

**Gross vs. Net Production of Bioenergy.** There is a distinction between gross and net production of bioenergy (29, 30). In assessing the WF of heat, electricity, and fuels from biomass, we looked at the WF of the gross energy output from crops. We did not study energy inputs in the production chain, such as energy requirements in the agricultural system (e.g., energy use for the production of fertilizers and pesticides) or energy use during the industrial production of the biofuel. Neglecting energy inputs means that this study underestimates the WF of bioenergy, most particularly so in cases where agricultural systems have a relatively large energy input. For example, if energy input equals 50% of the energy output—something common in bioenergy production systems (30)—the WF of the net bioenergy production would be twice the WF of the gross energy production.

## Conclusions

The WF of bioenergy is large when compared to other forms of energy. In general, it is more efficient to use total biomass, including stems and leaves, to generate electricity than to produce a biofuel. For most crops, the WF of bioelectricity is about a factor of 2 smaller than the WF of bioethanol or biodiesel. This difference is caused by the crop fraction that can be used. For electricity, total biomass can be used; for bioethanol or biodiesel, only the starch or oil fraction of the yield can be used. In general, the WF of bioethanol is smaller than that of biodiesel. The WF of bioenergy shows large variation, depending on 3 factors: (i) the crop used, (ii) the climate at the location of production, and (iii) the agricultural practice:

- i. For electricity generation, sugar beet, maize, and sugar cane with WFs of  $\approx 50$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ are the most favorable crops, followed by barley, rye, and rice with WFs of  $\approx 70$ – $80$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ. Rapeseed and jatropha, typical energy crops showing WFs of  $\approx 400$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ, are the least water-efficient. For the production of ethanol, 2 crops grown in a temperate climate (sugar beet and potato) with WFs of  $\approx 60$  and  $100$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ, respectively, are most efficient, followed by a crop typical for a warm climate, sugar cane, showing a WF just below  $110$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ. Values for maize and cassava are larger than for sugar beet, sugar cane, and potato at  $110$  and  $125$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ, respectively. With a WF of  $>400$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ, sorghum is by far the most disadvantageous crop. For biodiesel production, soybean and rapeseed, crops mainly grown for food, show the best WF at  $\approx 400$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ; jatropha has the least favorable WF of  $\approx 600$  m<sup>3</sup>/GJ.
- ii. Results show large differences in crop water requirements among countries, caused by differences in climate. The crop water requirement of sugar beet grown in Iran, for example, is twice the weighted global average value.
- iii. Agricultural practice determines yields and thus differences among WFs of crops, even where there is a similar climate. If yield levels are relatively low, WFs are high and vice versa. For example, in Kazakhstan yields of barley, potato, and wheat are relatively low. In combination with unfavorable climatic factors this results in high values for the WFs. Conditions in Denmark are favorable for wheat resulting in relatively low crop water requirements.

Theoretically, all crops can be used for energy, including crops such as rice and rye that are currently mainly used for food. Water use for a specific crop does not depend on whether the

crop is for energy or for food. Some food crops, including rice, are more water-efficient in producing a unit of ethanol, biodiesel, or electricity than some typical energy crops, such as rapeseed or jatropha. The ethical discussion on whether food crops can be used for energy should be extended to a discussion on whether we should use our limited water resource base for food or for energy.

The scientific and the international political communities promote a shift toward renewable energy sources, such as biomass, to limit the emission of greenhouse gases. This study has shown that biomass production goes hand in hand with large water requirements. There are already reasons for profound concern in several regions and countries with limited water resources about whether the food and fiber needs of future generations can be met. If a shift toward a larger contribution from bioenergy to total energy supply takes place, results of this study can be used to select the crops and countries that (under current production circumstances) produce bioenergy in the most water-efficient way.

## Methods

The calculation of the WF of bioenergy is done in several steps including the calculation of (i) the WF of crops, (ii) energy yields of bioethanol, biodiesel, heat, and electricity per crop, and (iii) the WF of heat, electricity, and first-generation and next-generation biofuels. The method is presented in detail in the *SI Methods*.

**Calculation of the WF of Crops.** For the assessment of the WF of bioenergy, the study follows the method of Hoekstra and Chapagain (13) to arrive at estimates of the WF of crops. WF calculations were made by adding up daily crop evapotranspiration (mm/day) using the model CROPWAT 4.3 (28) over growing periods distinguishing between the green and the blue WF. These calcu-

lations provided information on the crop water requirements for the 12 crops shown in Table S1 and for jatropha. Calculations were performed for the main producing countries, deriving data from the FAO (3). In general, yields show variations over the years. The study, therefore, calculated average yields over 5 production years (1997–2001) by using data from the FAO (31).

**Calculation of the WF of Heat and Electricity from Biomass.** For the calculation of the WF of heat from biomass, the study has followed the method of Gerbens-Leenes, et al. (23), which calculated the energy yield of a crop (GJ/ton) by combining data on the heat of combustion of plant components with information on composition, harvest index, and dry-mass fraction of a crop, as shown in Tables S4 and S5. The WF of heat from a crop ( $\text{m}^3/\text{GJ}$ ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the total crop biomass, including stems and leaves, ( $\text{m}^3/\text{ton}$ ) by the total heat content (GJ/ton). The WF of biomass electricity ( $\text{m}^3/\text{GJ}$ ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the total crop biomass ( $\text{m}^3/\text{ton}$ ) by the electricity output per crop unit (GJ/ton).

**Calculation of the WF of First-Generation Biofuels.** The WF of ethanol-energy from a crop ( $\text{m}^3/\text{GJ}$ ) was calculated by dividing the WF of the crop yield ( $\text{m}^3/\text{ton}$ ) by the ethanol-energy yield (GJ/ton). The WF of biodiesel-energy ( $\text{m}^3/\text{GJ}$ ) was calculated in a similar way. Table S6 gives the HHVs of ethanol and biodiesel. For first-generation biofuels, this study fully allocated the WF of the crop to the biofuels derived, assuming that the value of the residues of production is much lower than the value of the biofuel.

**Calculation of the WF of Next-Generation Biofuels.** It is expected that wastes, including cellulose, will form an attractive source for the production of liquid, next-generation biofuels so that industry can use total biomass. For the WF of next-generation biofuels, this study assumes that the WF of next-generation biofuels will never be lower than the WF of the total crop biomass ( $\text{m}^3/\text{ton}$ ) divided by the energy content (GJ/ton), where the latter is expressed in terms of its HHV.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** We gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments of David Pimentel on an earlier version of this paper.

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