

 SOUNDBITE

**//** *It's the equivalent of those exciting first few steps of a baby.* **//**

— Sir Richard Branson, Virgin Group Chairman, commenting on the first commercial aircraft to fly on biofuel, February 24, 2008.

Virgin Atlantic made the headlines in February when it became the first commercial airline to fly on renewable energy (“biofuel”). Its unmodified Boeing 747-400 made a test flight from London Heathrow to Amsterdam with one of its four fuel tanks containing a mix of coconut and palm oil. (The other three tanks contained standard jet fuel as a safety measure.)

Critics were quick to dismiss the event as “greenwashing,” underlining the environmental and economic concerns surrounding biofuels. Growing biofuel crops absorbs some carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) from the atmosphere but the moderate emissions savings can be outweighed by the CO<sub>2</sub> emitted during farming and processing. In addition, the sheer size of land required to farm sufficient quantities of biofuel plants may encourage deforestation and reduce biodiversity. There is also concern that rising demand for crops such as corn (used for ethanol) is pushing up the price of food to unaffordable levels. “Second-generation” biofuels such as algae may, however, present fewer of these risks.

Other industry observers praised Sir Branson’s attempt to advance research into alternative fuels while raising the visibility of “green” issues in aviation. Continental Airlines also said it would conduct a demonstration flight with biofuels in the first half of 2009.

The Virgin Atlantic news came a week after the International Air Transport Association (IATA) announced its partnership with Solar Impulse, a Switzerland-based project aiming to fly an aircraft on solar energy alone. Initially carrying only one person, the first test flights are scheduled for early 2009. IATA’s ultimate aim is to create a zero-emissions commercial aircraft within 50 years.