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Europe burns its wine lake

Leftovers become biofuel as officials move to cut excess production.

[Katharine Sanderson](#)

The European Commission is putting out to tender the opportunity to turn its excess wine into bioethanol. But if the commission gets its way, this will be the last time the European Union subsidizes such a move.

In a world where everything from Britain's left-over cooking fat to Florida's orange peels are being used to make energy, it seems a logical step to do the same for Europe's excess wine. But, says Michael Mann, commission spokesman for agriculture and rural development, it would be better to stop the excess wine from being made.

The European Union currently spends 1.3 billion euros (US\$1.75 billion) a year supporting the wine industry. Up to 7% of this, or 90 million euros, goes towards 'crisis distillation', where as much as 45 million litres of EU wine, often of undrinkably poor quality, is bought and distilled into ethanol for use as fuel.

Crisis distillation has occurred in four of the past six years.

Next Wednesday — the same day as the deadline for the tendering process — the commissioner for agriculture and rural development, Mariann Fischer Boel, will propose to the 27 member states that crisis distillation should be stopped, as part of a wider shake-up of the European wine industry.

"People make poor-quality wine because we have this safety net for them — it's just a disposal mechanism," says Mann. "It's not our intention that wine should be a basic raw material for biofuels."

Sour grapes

If Boel's proposal passes, producers would be encouraged to grow fewer grapes and stick to making high-quality wine. "Over a five-year period uncompetitive producers would step out," says Mann. The move is expected to meet resistance, however; wine-making is a major economic and emotional issue in Europe.

In the meantime, there are still 200 million litres of wine and alcohol from wine by-products to be disposed of this year alone.

"Wine is ethanol already," points out Y.-H. Percival Zhang, a biochemical engineer from Virginia Tech, Blacksburg. Ten litres of wine yields one litre of pure alcohol; the biggest problem, says Zhang, is removing the water that forms up to 90% of wine. Water in ethanol drastically reduces its quality as a fuel.

The EU supports biofuels in general, says Mann — just not from leftover wine. In the short-term the plan is to invest in first-generation biofuels, such as ethanol from cereal crops. Long-term, the strategy is to move away from having fuel and food crops compete, says Mann, and instead use the woodier, often wasted, parts of food crops for second-generation biofuels such as cellulosic ethanol.

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Up to 45 million litres of European wine are distilled into ethanol each year.

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