

Mongabay Series: Bioenergy

EU votes to keep woody biomass as renewable energy, ignores climate risk

by Justin Catanoso on 16 September 2022



- *Despite growing public opposition, the European Parliament voted this week not to declassify woody biomass as renewable energy. The forest biomass industry quickly declared victory, while supporters of native forests announced their plan to continue the fight — even in court.*
- *The EU likely renewed its commitment to burning wood as a source of energy largely to help meet its target of cutting EU carbon emissions by 55% by 2030, something it likely couldn't achieve without woody biomass (which a carbon accounting loophole counts*

- *Scientific evidence shows that burning wood pellets is a major source of carbon at the smokestack. The European Union also likely continued its embrace of biomass this week as it looks down the barrel of Russian threats to cut off natural gas supplies this winter over the EU's opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*
- *While the EU decision maintains that whole trees won't be subsidized for burning, that natural forests will be protected, and that there will be limits to logging old growth and primary forests, these provisions include legal loopholes and were not backed with monitoring or enforcement commitments. No dates were set for biomass burning phase down.*

For three years, European forest advocates have courted public opinion and lobbied the EU parliament to stop spending billions annually to subsidize the burning of wood for energy — a process ultimately dirtier than coal — and to reject the EU's official designation of woody biomass as a renewable, zero-emissions energy source on par with wind and solar.

The relentless campaign grew steadily in strength, with recent opinion polls (<https://www.telegraaf.nl/watuzegt/1974050291/uitslag-stelling-houtstook-niet-de-oplossing>) showing most Europeans in favor of protecting their shrinking natural forests over seeing them harvested to make wood pellets to burn in converted coal power plants. A growing portion of parliament too began speaking out against woody biomass burning.

So it was this week that the European Parliament voted in Brussels for amendments to its Renewable Energy Directive (RED) that are the first-ever ostensibly aimed at protecting natural forests and limiting biomass

advocates.

With the EU legally mandated to phase out coal by 2030, the parliament voted down an amendment to declassify woody biomass as a renewable energy source, which the bioenergy industry immediately applauded. With that continued designation, carbon emissions from biomass go legally uncouncted by EU countries at the smokestack — as if they don't exist.

"The European Parliament once again voted to recognize primary woody biomass as a renewable energy source," U.S.-based Enviva, the world's largest producer of wood pellets, said in a statement, noting also that RED remains broadly supportive of biomass usage. "Enviva welcomes the designation as it marks a critical step in the right direction toward more low-carbon alternatives to fossil fuels for power and heat generation, as part of an all-in renewables strategy to reduce carbon emissions and limit global dependence on fossil fuels."



Here, at an Enviva wood pellet manufacturing facility in Sampson county, North Carolina, U.S., thousands of whole trees are stacked in a ring, destined to become wood pellets and be shipped abroad. In 2021, the EU imported 3.7 million tons of pellets mostly from the U.S. In light of these facts, it is difficult to reconcile the EU's commitment this week to not subsidize the taking of whole trees directly to feed its enormous current and future forest biomass demands. Image courtesy of the Dogwood Alliance.

- Whole trees taken directly from forests will not be subsidized,

(https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/science.aat2305?casa_token=zndL7Q2Ery8AAAAA%3AaU6N1E0RnQSc2ry5C5R11zV_rd-RSpCzuIVCtiof5LXfex3xpjnS_FY2mu3b_KacUvW7iOhF7RCsm00) shows that burning wood creates *more* carbon emissions than coal per unit of energy, thus undercutting the EU's carbon-reduction targets in actuality, though reducing them on paper. Burning woody biomass also levels forests that would curb climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide and storing it above and below ground, as long as the trees remain standing. Those standing forests also support significant biodiversity, which clearcut forests and replanted plantation monocultures don't. The long held, but disputed notion is that wood is renewable because trees can be regrown. But more than 500 scientists signed a letter (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/20482842-scientist-leter-to-biden-van-der-leyden-michel-suga-moon-february-11-2021>) to world leaders last year arguing that the carbon debt from burning biomass takes 50-100 years to be repaid from replanting trees or expanding forests — time humanity doesn't have if it is to avoid climate catastrophe.



Forest advocates from The Netherlands protest the use of biomass for energy outside the E.U. Parliament in Brussels. A recent opinion poll found that most Europeans are in favor of protecting their shrinking natural forests over seeing them harvested to make wood pellets to burn in converted coal power plants. Image courtesy of Comite Schone Lucht/Clean Air Committee.

though residue from trees and lumber waste will continue to

A moral victory?

note there is no

As for forest advocates, the Brussels vote left them mostly with what they describe as moral victories and incremental gains. They recognize that the fight to keep native forests intact in the Baltics, Scandinavia, as well as the U.S. Southeast and Canada's British Columbia, will continue for the foreseeable future.

"Criticism of burning wood for energy finally entered the European Parliament; that's good," said Fenna Swart, a leading forest advocate from The Netherlands. "There is clearly rising awareness. So you can say this is the beginning of the end. It's no longer an if, but when, biomass will be deleted from RED."

In pursuit of that goal, a group of NGOs from across the EU filed an annulment action against the European Commission, the executive body of the EU, seeking to block forest bioenergy and forestry projects from inclusion under the Sustainable Finance Taxonomy, a tool that helps investors understand whether an economic activity is environmentally sustainable, and is designed to navigate the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Clementine Baldon of Baldon Advocats (<https://baldon-avocats.com/>) in Paris, a convener and co-author of the legal challenge, said in a statement Friday, "By classifying polluting and destructive activities as sustainable, the Commission is directing so-called 'sustainable investment' towards activities causing immense environmental harm. We are therefore asking the [EU] Court to annul the Commission's refusal to review its decision to label these [bioenergy] activities as sustainable."

Still, unless the suit succeeds — or if, in the unlikely event changes are made to the biomass RED amendments over the next two months by EU Commission and Council

policy for another three years.

Markus Pieper (MP Germany), the lead member of parliament on RED, mostly dodged the controversy around woody biomass in a statement

(<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40134/parliament-backs-boost-for-renewables-use-and-energy-savings>) about this week's vote: "We have ... raised the requirements for the sustainability of biomass and fuels, and showed ways in which biogenic materials can make a real economic contribution to the energy transition."

Here's what was voted on this week: oversight either in

Europe, the U.S. or Canada to determine the source of wood pellets — the vast majority of which do come from whole trees.

- The amount of forest wood harvested for pellets will be capped at the average harvests seen between 2017 and 2022, and will then phase down (not phase out). Critics note that pellet demand continues to surge, leaving a high baseline for future harvests without any specific dates for usage phase down.
- While natural forests are supposed to be protected, Parliament voted that any forests affected by pests, logged for fire prevention, or affected by natural disaster are eligible for pelletizing. This would include many natural forests worldwide today. Again, monitoring of sourcing is not mentioned.
- Limits on logging old growth and primary forests for biomass were approved. But critics note that loopholes provide scant protections, with no means identified for monitoring or enforcement.

"The [RED] definition of 'primary woody biomass' exempts too many categories of forest wood," from being burned to make energy, said scientist Mary Booth, director of the Partnership for Policy Integrity in the U.S. "Rather than reducing burning forest biomass, as members of parliament [may have] intended, the large number of loopholes in the [RED] definition mean it could lead to an increase in burning trees, contributing to even more climate and biodiversity destruction."

Conversation



A forest in Kurgja, Estonia prior to clearcutting by an Estonian wood pellet maker. Image by Karl Adami.



A section of the Kurgja forest after clearcutting, as documented by environmentalists commissioned by Greenpeace Netherlands. Natural forests store more carbon than tree plantations, and also support far more biodiversity. This week's RED biomass amendments offered no indication as to how the EU will monitor or enforce its biomass policies with the forestry industry. Image by Karl Adami.

Surging demand

A lot is at stake economically and environmentally. According to the European Commission, the EU spent \$13 billion in 2020 subsidizing bioenergy — money forest advocates say could have been better invested in zero-carbon renewable energy such as wind, solar and nuclear.

the demand for wood pellets is surging around the world, especially in the United Kingdom, Japan and South Korea (<https://news.mongabay.com/2022/05/missing-the-emissions-for-the-trees-biomass-burning-booms-in-east-asia/>). Demand is also growing — and more European forests (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/07/world/europe/eu-logging-wood-pellets.html>) are being clearcut — as Russia reduces natural gas supplies to Europe with the Ukraine war dragging on. In 2021, the EU produced 19.7 million tons of wood pellets itself, while importing 3.7 million tons mostly from the United States, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data (https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=EU%20Wood%20Pellet%20Annual_The%20Hague_European%20Union_0049.pdf). Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, U.S. shipments of pellets to the have soared, said Swart, whose group, the Clean Air Committee in The Netherlands monitors foreign shipments entering the port of Rotterdam.



Christian Rakos, president of the World Bioenergy Association in Austria, a forestry lobbying group. Image courtesy of the WBA.

Booth's group estimates that uncounted carbon emissions from burning woody biomass in the EU exceed 400 million metric tons annually — equal to the total emissions reported by Italy and Poland (Europe's coal-burning capital). This biomass boom is playing out in an EU committed to the aggressive target of cutting emissions by 55% by 2030 — a goal it likely couldn't achieve without embracing biomass as a zero carbon energy source.

Christian Rakos, president of the World Bioenergy Association in Austria, a forestry lobbying group, maintains that his organization

carrying out selective logging for biomass that doesn't damage a forest's carbon-sink capacity, is essential to Europe's climate mitigation efforts.

"I completely agree that sustainability of forest management must be granted at all times and biodiversity is of critical concern," Rakos told Mongabay. "Campaigning against bioenergy use seems like a great solution for ensuring both. Unfortunately, it's not that simple," with sustainable energy needed to assure economic security.

However, forest advocates such as Peg Putt, coordinator of the Forest Biomass Working Group of the Environmental Paper Network, an NGO, hold an entirely opposite perspective.

"Europe continues to make 60% of its so-called 'renewable' energy from biomass and biofuels, which are not low-emission energies at all," Putt said. "Alleged benefits of burning forest biomass are illusory and actually exacerbate climate change, which has been amply demonstrated by many scientists but roundly ignored by the European Parliament." What remains clear is that this week's RED woody biomass decision won't prevent EU, U.S. or Canadian native forests — critical carbon sinks in the climate crisis — from being diminished.

Banner image: A pile of wood pellets. The EU, Great Britain, Japan, and South Korea are all committed to burning woody biomass to make energy, claiming it is carbon neutral; the United States is a top wood pellet producer. Scientists warn that large scale burning of woody biomass could be catastrophic for the global climate. Image by D-Kuru

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