

Objectors to Forth Energy's Dundee biomass plans claim Scottish Government treatment of objections amounts to mismanagement and possible bias

For immediate release

Press release by Friends of the Earth Tayside, Biofuelwatch, Westend Community Council and GAINS Scotland

(Dundee, 2nd March 2011) - Campaigners against Forth Energy's biomass “renewable” energy plant application in Dundee express their dismay at the handling of planning objections by the Scottish Government. Only two objection letters have been published by the government's Energy Consents Unit, while other detailed objections were not even acknowledged (1). Furthermore, members of the public and NGOs were held to a tight four-week consultation period, yet Forth Energy has been allowed to publish new documents after the end of that period, with critics being given no opportunity to submit comments on those.

Objectors to the application have raised serious concerns about the impact which such a large biomass power station, one of four which the company proposes, will have on forests and on the climate worldwide. Locally, they are concerned about the likely impact on air quality and thus the health of local people and on fish and other marine life in the Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary, a highly protected marine area. The low level of heat recovery anticipated by Forth Energy is a further weakness in the proposal.

When Friends of the Earth Tayside, one of the groups which has objected to the application, queried with the Energy Consents Unit why their letter had not been acknowledged or published, they were advised that the email account to which it had been sent was 'not operational' (2). The email account in question (EnergyConsents@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) was advertised by the Scottish Government as well as Forth Energy as the one to which comments on the application should be sent. It continues to be featured as the contact e-mail address on the Consents Unit web page.

Andrew Llanwarne from Friends of the Earth Tayside states: “It is not clear what lies behind the Scottish Government’s failure to acknowledge our letter of objection, along with others which we know of. However, this issue throws serious doubts on their handling of the application and raises concern about possible bias in favour of Forth Energy. It meant that Dundee City Council did not receive copies of these objections, and they could not be reflected in the Planning Director’s report, prior to the Council reaching its decision last month.”

National campaign group Biofuelwatch was advised verbally by the Energy Consents Unit that 'due to data protection law', neither their objection nor any others except those directly consulted by the Scottish Government would be publicly acknowledged.

Almuth Ernsting from Biofuelwatch comments: “Members of the public and organisations who object to a planning application expect their comments to be publicly acknowledged in some form. This interpretation of 'data protection law' seems absurd and unjustifiable. There is no imaginable reason why data protection law should allow a response from WWF to be published, but not one from Friends of the Earth or our own organisation.” It is common practice for local authorities across the UK to publish details of all comments on planning applications.

Ann Prescott from the Westend Community Council in Dundee, one of only two objectors to the application acknowledged by the Scottish Government, expresses her concerns about the deadline for comments being applied to objectors, but not to Forth Energy:

"I find it very disturbing that there is no evidence that a large volume of letters of objection to the government's Energy Consents Unit have not been ignored completely. Forth Energy, on the other hand, has been allowed to modify its proposals even after the end of the formal period of consultation."

Since the consultation period closed on 17th December, the Scottish Government's website has stated that no further “consultation responses or representations from members of the public” would be considered.

The Courier previously published concerns by Dundee City Councillor Fraser Macpherson that the application of the four-week deadline has prevented Councillors from registering their own objection to the application, since they had been advised by the Council's legal team that they should not publicly comment prior to the planning committee's vote on the application which took place on 24th January (3).

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Notes:

- 1) The Scottish Government's webpage for the application, with the small list of published comments is <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Business-Industry/Energy/Infrastructure/Energy-Consents/Applications-Database/Biomass/Dundee-Index>.
- 2) A copy of the email with this statement, dated 2nd February, can be obtained by contacting Friends of the Earth Tayside. Dundee University Renewable Energy Society, Residents Against Tay Turbines (RATTS), Green Alternatives to Incineration in Scotland, Biofuelwatch and Greener Leith also submitted formal objections during the four-week period. Biofuelwatch have copies of hundreds of objections and furthermore a separate petition by several thousand people was reported by the Dundee Courier in September.
- 3) See: www.thecourier.co.uk/News/Dundee/article/10179/dundee-councillor-kevin-keenan-fears-biomass-plant-may-lead-to-council-being-fined.html