

‘Companies’ claims of sustainable biomass are greenwashing’ say environmental campaigners

Press release – for immediate release

12th September 2012 - A new report by environmental campaign and research organisation Biofuelwatch (1) criticises energy companies’ claims and Government policies related to ‘sustainable biomass’ as deeply flawed. It coincides with a new UK Government consultation about biomass sustainability standards which are to be introduced from October 2013 (2).

Generous subsidies for biomass electricity are behind industry plans which, if realised, would see around 90 million tonnes of wood being burnt in power stations every year (3) – nine times more than the UK’s total annual wood production. Under Government proposals, such subsidies would in future only be available for biomass which meets limited environmental and greenhouse gas standards. However, as the Biofuelwatch report shows, there will be no independent check on whichever claims companies make. Instead, energy firms will be able to pay their own consultancy firms to produce whichever sustainability report is required for them to keep getting the subsidies, and they will also be able to choose between a range of ineffective voluntary certification schemes.

Report author Almuth Ernsting states: “All that biomass sustainability standards ensure is that energy companies have paid a consultant to tick the right boxes. Recent scandals ranging from Libor fixing to care home scandals to the breast implant scandal all show what happens when regulations are put in place but companies are effectively left to police themselves. And as our report shows, claims made by leading energy firms about their own ‘biomass sustainability policies’ lack all credibility.”

The report further shows that the proposed biomass standards ignore the science about the very high carbon emissions associated with bioenergy. Most of those emissions stem from indirect land use change and from the large initial carbon spike associated with burning trees for energy and all of those remain ignored. Biomass power stations emit on average 50% more carbon dioxide than coal power stations for the same amount of electricity. The Government assumes that all of that carbon will be absorbed again by new trees, yet it can take minutes to burn trees and many decades for new trees to absorb all the carbon released – and forests, once they are cut down for energy – might not recover at all.

Contacts:

Almuth Ernsting, Tel ++44-131-6232600
Emilia Hanna, Tel ++44-07595768349

Notes:

- (1) Biofuelwatch is a not-for-profit organisation campaigning against the expansion of industrial scale biomass and biofuels in the UK and US (www.biofuelwatch.org.uk). The report Sustainable Biomass: A Modern Myth is available from www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2012/biomass_myth_report.
- (2) The government’s new consultation on ‘Proposals to Ensure Sustainability and Affordability for the Use of Biomass Under the Renewables Obligation (RO)’ can be found at www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/biomass_ro/biomass_ro.aspx
- (3) For a map which shows announced industry plans, see www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/wp-content/maps/uk-biomass.html