Axe Drax: For Forests, Communities and the Climate

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Drax: burning forests at our expense

Drax Power Station in Selby in Yorkshire is the UK's single largest carbon emitter and the biggest tree burner in the entire world. Drax emitted over 13 million tonnes of CO2 in 2024. Originally built as a coal power station, Drax converted to burn wood in 2014 and now burns millions of tonnes of imported wood every year, in 2024 alone it burned 7.3 million tonnes of wood, much of it from the clear-felling of biodiverse forests in the Southern USA, Canada and Europe, with catastrophic impacts on forests, wildlife, communities and the climate.

Last year, Drax received £869 million in subsidies from UK energy bill payers whilst making almost £1.1 billion in profits and giving its CEO, Will Gardiner, a pay packet of almost £3 million.

Drax already receives around £2 million per day in renewable subsidies from our energy bills to burn trees. In February this year, the UK Government announced plans to grant a further four years of subsidies to Drax once the existing subsidies end in 2027, with no requirement for the power station to capture any of the carbon dioxide it emits and no limits on how much wood it can burn.

These government plans to extend Drax's subsidies have not been granted but the legislation required to grant them has been voted into law. Instead of wasting our money on

funding the UK's biggest carbon emitter, the Government could invest in real climate solutions like home insulation, and wind and solar power, that can create new green jobs and help to tackle both the climate emergency and the cost of living crisis.

Where does Drax get its wood to burn?

Almost all of the wood that Drax burns is imported, and a large proportion of it — 66.7% — comes from the logging of forests in the southeastern United States. These forests lie at the heart of a Global Biodiversity Hotspot and are home to many rare and endangered species, including black bears, salamanders, and a wide variety of bird species. In addition to their ecological value, these forests play a crucial role in protecting local communities from flooding and extreme weather.

In 2024, 23.4% of the wood burned by Drax came from Canada. A 2022 BBC Panorama investigation revealed that Drax was sourcing wood from the logging of primary forests in British Columbia. Further investigations in 2024 showed that the company continued to cut down rare and old-growth forests. Research by Biofuelwatch, Conservation North, and the Bulkley Valley Stewardship Coalition found that throughout 2023, Drax routinely sourced whole logs from primary and old-growth logging sites, including areas with a high proportion of 250-year-old ancient forest. In May 2024, BBC Newsnight uncovered 189 breaches of environmental laws at Drax's pellet mills in Canada. Then, in February 2025, BBC News reported that Drax was continuing to misreport its sustainability data and was still burning wood from primary forests — despite a £25 million voluntary penalty paid following an Ofgem investigation into the company's misreporting. This demonstrates that the regulator's intervention has not stopped Drax's harmful practices.

Logging for wood pellets in Canada is destroying the habitats of imperilled species, including the woodland caribou, Canada lynx, and pine marten. It is also affecting more than three billion birds that rely on the boreal forest for nesting and breeding, many of which are classified as threatened with extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Drax sourced 6.5% of the wood it burned in 2024 from the Baltic States — 5.5% from Latvia and 1% from Estonia — where forest habitats are disappearing both inside and outside protected areas. Forest biodiversity in these countries is in decline, largely due to increased logging intensity driven in part by the demand for woody biomass energy. In Latvia, the forest bird index, which tracks changes in common forest specialist bird

populations, showed a moderate decline between 2005 and 2022. The black stork, once a symbol of the naturalness of Latvian forests, is now critically endangered at a national level. Other nationally threatened forest bird species include the hazel grouse, pygmy owl, boreal owl, goshawk, common buzzard, three-toed woodpecker, and marsh tit.

In Estonia, forest loss is threatening one of the main habitats of the rare flying squirrel, which is highly sensitive to clear-cutting. Estonia's forests have already shifted from being a carbon sink to a carbon source — a trend also observed in Latvia. The remaining wood Drax burned in 2024 came from Brazil (1.5%), Portugal (0.7%), the UK (0.6%), Bulgaria (0.3%), other European countries (0.2%), and Lithuania (0.1%). In early 2024, a joint investigation by Biofuelwatch and the Portuguese NGO ZERO found that the Pinewells pellet plant — a Drax supplier — had been sourcing trees from clear-cutting operations in the mountainous Serra da Lousã Nature Reserve, a protected Natura 2000 site.

Drax is not only a major burner of wood pellets but also a major producer. It owns pellet mills in the United States, and Canada - having acquired Pinnacle Pellets - and is also supplied by Enviva, the world's largest pellet producer. In 2024, Drax produced four million tonnes of wood pellets, an increase from the 3.8 million tonnes produced in 2023

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Drax says that it is a 'renewable energy' company and that burning wood for energy is 'low carbon.' Is this true?

No — the claim that burning wood is low carbon is based on false accounting, which fails to include the carbon emissions released when the wood is burned.

Burning wood is just as damaging to the climate as burning fossil fuels. In 2021, more than 500 scientists wrote to President Biden and other world leaders, urging them to end subsidies for wood-burning energy due to its harmful climate impact. They warned: "As numerous studies have shown, this burning of wood will increase warming for decades to centuries. That is true even when the wood replaces coal, oil or natural gas."

In 2023, the UK Climate Change Committee stated that the “sustained use of large-scale biomass generation is not compatible with the path to Net Zero.” Their assessment reflects growing scientific consensus that biomass burning is not a climate solution.
New trees take decades or longer to regrow and reabsorb the carbon released by burning wood. The European Academies Scientific Advisory Council has warned that the negative climate impacts of burning wood can persist for decades to centuries. Furthermore, there simply are not enough trees in the world to meet Drax’s appetite for wood — particularly if other countries followed the same path and adopted biomass as an 'on paper net zero strategy'. In 2023 alone, Drax burned just under 20 times the total amount of wood pellets produced in the UK (most recently available figures).

Burning trees for electricity is the opposite of a genuine climate solution. Mature trees absorb and store more carbon over time, making them far more effective at mitigating climate change than any unproven technological fix. In truth, we already have the world’s best carbon capture and storage system: forests

Carbon Capture

Drax claims it is developing BECCS — Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage — a technology that involves capturing the carbon dioxide emitted from burning trees, transporting it via a new CO_2 pipeline, and pumping it beneath the North Sea. While earlier proposals suggested that any further subsidies should be contingent on a commitment to developing BECCS, the latest proposed subsidies include no requirement for Drax to even attempt carbon capture. In any case, BECCS is an unproven and dangerous distraction from the urgent priority of reducing emissions at source. BECCS is not inherently carbon-neutral or carbon-negative. It takes decades for the carbon released during combustion to be reabsorbed by newly planted trees, with estimates ranging from 44 to 104 years. Currently, there are no functioning or scalable BECCS projects anywhere in the world that involve the combustion of woody biomass. More broadly, carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology has a poor global track record, with most large-scale CCS projects failing to meet their projected carbon capture targets.

Neither Drax nor any other company has the technical capability to capture carbon from burning woody biomass at scale. Furthermore, the infrastructure required to transport and store CO_2 does not exist in the UK. To date, Drax has captured just 27 tonnes of CO_2 — all of which was later released back into the atmosphere.

Even if carbon capture were viable, it would not make the logging of biodiverse forests from around the world to produce the wood pellets burned environmentally sustainable. Nor would it mitigate the damage caused to local communities, especially environmental justice communities, that are disproportionately affected by the biomass industry.

There are also serious concerns about the viability of underground CO_2 storage. The Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis has reported leaks from Norway's Sleipner and Snøhvit geological storage sites — both frequently cited as leading examples of carbon capture and storage in action.

In addition, the proposed infrastructure poses major safety risks. Transporting large volumes of CO_2 through pipelines across inhabited areas carries the real danger of rupture. In Sartartia, Mississippi, a carbon dioxide pipeline burst in 2020 led to the evacuation of 200 people and hospitalisation of 45 — a stark reminder of the potential hazards associated with such systems.

Polluting communities

Companies that produce wood pellets have repeatedly been fined for breaching legal air pollution limits, particularly in the southeastern United States. This region is home to a disproportionate number of wood pellet mills, which are 50% more likely to be located in "environmental justice" communities — areas that are predominantly non-white and where residents often live below the poverty line. In 2022, Drax was accused of contributing to environmental racism after settling air pollution violations at its pellet mills in Louisiana.

A recent investigation revealed that Drax has violated United States environmental regulations 11,378 times since 2014. More recently, Drax was denied a request to increase pollution levels at its pellet mill in Gloster, Mississippi — a facility where the company has

already been fined multiple times for pollution violations. According to the decision of the permit board, the request was rejected based on Drax's history of non-compliance and the likelihood that the company would exceed pollution limits even under the terms of the new permit.

What's fuelling the problem?

Drax's operations are heavily subsidised — and the money comes directly from our energy bills. In 2023, Drax received £869 million in subsidies — that's approximately £2 million every single day — all paid for through a levy on consumers' energy bills. This funding is intended to support renewable energy, but because of the carbon accounting loophole, it is instead being used to subsidise the burning of trees at Drax.

A significant portion of these subsidies is delivered through the 'Contract for Difference' (CfD) scheme. Under this system, generators are meant to receive subsidies when electricity prices are low and pay money back to the grid when prices are high. However, in 2023, when energy prices spiked following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and amidst concerns about energy security, Drax exploited the system.

Rather than running its power stations under the CfD scheme, Drax switched off those units and instead sold its wood pellets on the open market — taking advantage of the higher prices. As a result, the company avoided paying back nearly £650 million to households. This manipulation of the system highlights a fundamental issue: Drax cannot be trusted with public money.

Government plans for new subsidies

In February 2025, the UK Government announced plans to grant Drax a further four years of subsidies once its current support ends in 2027. These proposed subsidies come with no requirements for the company to capture the carbon dioxide it emits, and no limits on the volume of wood it can burn — despite Drax already being the UK's single largest carbon emitter.

To enable Drax to qualify, the Government is proposing a new emissions threshold for fossil fuel-related supply chains that is higher than Drax's current emissions — a move that effectively weakens existing environmental standards. This proposal disregards a 2018 decision to implement stricter greenhouse gas limits for solid biomass projects under the Contract for Difference (CfD) scheme, limits which Drax would

not have been able to meet. Instead of revisiting those safeguards, the Government is using a Statutory Instrument to amend the 2018 legislation — avoiding full parliamentary scrutiny in the process. These changes have now been voted into law, despite many MPs having expressed concern over Drax's tree-burning practices and the environmental damage caused by industrial biomass.

It is extremely disappointing that Drax looks set to get another four years of bill payers' money to continue burning trees. We note however that the government has changed its narrative around Drax. It is no longer trying to defend Drax as a renewable, sustainable long-term solution. Instead, it now argues that keeping the power station going for another four years is a short term necessity for energy security. However, Ministers have refused to publish the energy security model on which they claim the decision is based
We now have a new concern: the proposed 'Clean Energy Campus' bid by Drax, York University and others which seeks to take advantage of government announced funding for Artificial Intelligence and data centres. If the government were to grant funding to an "AI Growth Zone " around Drax, this would fly in the face of its claimed intention of reducing how much money is given to Drax and how much wood it burns.

Biofuelwatch provides information, advocacy and campaigning in relation to the climate, environmental, human rights and public health impacts of large-scale industrial bioenergy.