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 14 million tonnes of CO_2 in 2025. Drax power station started as a coal power station in 1974. Between 2013 and 2018, the company converted four out of six units to burning wood pellets. Of the four units, up to three have been operating at any one time. The two remaining coal units were closed down in 2023. In 2025 alone Drax burned 7.5 million tonnes of wood pellets. This is the same quantity as around 15 million tonnes of freshly cut wood. Drax thus burned the equivalent of 144% times the UK's total annual wood harvest. However, all of the pellets burned by Drax were imported, three-quarters of them from the South-eastern USA and the remainder from Canada, the Baltic States, Portugal and, to a small extent, Brazil. In addition, Drax has become the world's second biggest producer of wood pellets, with nine pellet plants in western Canada (British Columbia and Alberta) and five in the south-Eastern USA. Most of Drax's Canadian pellets are sold to Japan and South Korea.

Many of the pellets sourced and produced by Drax come from the clearcutting of highly biodiverse and carbon-rich forests. They have a catastrophic impact on forests, wildlife, communities and the climate.During 2025, Drax received £999 million in subsidies from UK energy bill payers (over £2.7 million every single day!) whilst making £308 million net profit and giving its CEO, Will Gardiner, a pay packet of almost £2.6 million. Without subsidies, the company would have been in the red.

Following a government decision to extend Drax's subsidies for another four years once the existing subsidies end in March 2027, Drax signed a new subsidies contract in November 2025. The subsidies will cover Drax burning around 3.2 million tonnes of pellets a year (less than half as much as in 2025), but there are no requirements for the power station to capture any of the carbon dioxide it emits and no limits on how much wood it can burn.

At the same time, Drax is looking to partner with a data centre operator. The company has taken the initial steps towards a planning application for a large data centre next to the power station. They have also partnered with York University and two local authorities to apply for government support for an AI Growth Zone, which, if approved, would see them get support for an even larger AI data centre powered by Drax. Drax is keen on powering a large data centre so that they can burn even more wood than the amount subsidised from 2027 and boost their profits further.

What are the impacts of Drax's wood pellet production and sourcing?

All of the wood that Drax burns is imported and 75% of it comes from the ***southeastern United States***. Wood from that region is sourced both from monoculture pine plantations and from the clearcutting of native forests. Those native 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. Monoculture tree pine plantations offer little or no habitat for any wildlife. They have, for many decades, been developed on land that used to be covered by biodiverse forests. Since 1953, the region has lost around 15 million hectares of natural forests, while pine plantation acreage has grown by about 17 million hectares.

The efforts of Drax to expand their global wood pellet business has in several instances encountered serious economic headwinds and fierce community opposition. One high profile example of Drax being forced into retreat from their plans of growth is ***California***, where Drax had previously intervened in climate policy development to promote BECCS as a supposed pathway for climate action.

Lobbying for carbon capture set the stage for Drax to sign a 'memorandum of understanding' with the California-based Golden State Natural Resources (GSNR) to pursue the construction and operation of two new wood pellet manufacturing plants and a storage and export facility to send 1 million tons of wood pellets a year to global energy markets. The GSNR project alone would have represented a 10% increase in wood pellet production in the United States. The threat of the global wood pellet sector getting established in California set off alarms across the state, the country and the world, and a fierce campaign resulted in GSNR and Drax abandoning their wood pellet export scheme in summer 2025.

Putting the brakes on Drax bringing the global wood pellet sector to California dramatically interrupted the unimpeded expansion of the biomass industry and also shined a light on the folly of burning biomass to capture carbon.

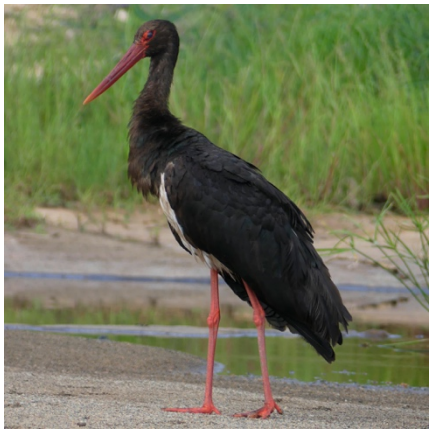
In 2025, around 25% of the wood burned by Drax came from ***Canada***. Drax does not publish data to show where in Canada their wood comes from. However, the overwhelming majority of all pellets imported by the UK are burned by Drax. Canadian trade records show that around 37% - the single largest share - of pellets exported to the UK in 2025 came from British Columbia. Drax has a near-monopoly of pellet production in that province. Drax pellet plants are surrounded by primary and oldgrowth forest. A 2022 BBC Panorama investigation revealed that Drax was sourcing wood from the logging of primary forests and oldgrowth forest in British Columbia. Further BBC 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 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. That's even though sourcing wood from primary and oldgrowth forests does not actually breach the UK's existing biomass sustainability standards. In early 2026, campaigners from the Bulkley Valley Stewardship Coalition in British Columbia discovered large piles of subalpine fir from old growth forests, some as old as 250 yrs, waiting to be taken to Drax's Smithers pellet plant. Logging for wood pellets in British Columbia 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).

Picture: Caption: Stems of Subalpine fir averaging some 250 years of age, waiting to be taken to Drax pellet plant, Photo: Len Vanderstar, Bulkley Valley Stewardship Coalition

Other Canadian pellets imported by the UK and thus mostly Drax came from Quebec (25%), New Brunswick (23.4%) and Nova Scotia (14.2%). In each of those provinces, there is rampant clearcutting of highly biodiverse forests. In Nova Scotia, for example, no more

than 0.5% of old growth forests remain and even those remnants are not fully protected. According to evidence by the NGO Ecology Action Centre in 2021, pellets made by the company Great Northern Timber, the Province's largest pellet producer and exporter, cuts forests on private and Crown land and is part of the Westfor Consortium which holds a large timber allotment from Crown lands. Although, in theory, there has been a cap on the overall amount of wood allowed to be cut every year, in practice this has not been enforced. 12.2% of the pellets burned by Drax in 2025 came from the Baltic States, the vast majority of them from Latvia and a much smaller amount from Estonia. In both countries, clear-cutting native forests is the prevalent forestry method. Over the last ten years, logging volumes have been so high that both countries' carbon sinks have been shrinking.

Drax's third biggest pellet sourcing region is the ***Baltic States***. In Latvia, where 11.5% of the pellets burned by Drax, the entire land (LULUCF) sector has turned from a carbon sink into a net source of greenhouse gas emissions since 2020, with forests becoming a net source of emissions in 2022. According to the Latvian government: "*the most important impact factor is harvesting rate*." In Estonia (from where Drax imported around 60,000 tonnes of pellets in 2025), the land sector has also become a net source of greenhouse gas emissions since 2020, with forests having been a net source of emissions during six out of eight years between 2016 and 2023. According to the Estonian government: "*Carbon flows derived from the forest category have the largest influence…Emissions and uptake of Forest land are predominantly determined by changes in forest growing stock*." This is a euphemism for forests being cut down faster than they can grow back. And investigation published by Cut Carbon not Forests reveals that forests surrounding eight wood pellet plants in Estonia and Latvia that have links to Drax have seen net losses of carbon for more than a decade. The intensity of logging in both countries is linked to a decline in biodiversity, especially forest birds, such as the Black stork, Hazel grouse and Lesser spotted woodpeckers.



Picture: Black stork, Photo: Javier Puig Ochoa, Wikimedia Commons

Drax imported just over 31,000 tonnes of wood pellets from Portugal in 2025, early 2024, a joint investigation by Biofuelwatch and the Portuguese NGO ZERO found that the Pinewells pellet plant - a Drax supplier during that year - had been sourcing trees from clear-cutting operations in the mountainous Serra da Lousã Nature Reserve, a protected Natura 2000 site. A separate 2024 report by ZERO shows that "*the pellet industry's huge demand for wood is contributing to the sharp decline in pine stands in Portuga*l".

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. The 14 million tonnes of CO_2 emitted by Drax power station in 2025 will remain in the atmosphere just as long and heat the planet just as much as the amount of carbon emissions from burning coal, oil or gas.

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. 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.

Polluting communities

Companies that produce wood pellets have repeatedly been fined for breaching legal air pollution limits, particularly in the southeastern United States, where 75% of the pellets burned by Drax came from in 2025 and where the company operates five pellet plants. 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. According to a recent investigation by Land and Climate Review found, by the beginning of 2026, Drax had violated environmental limits over 18,000 times in the US,

and 6,000 times in Louisiana alone. In Mississippi, Drax has had to pay $2.725 million in fines for permit violations. In the words of Belinda Joyner, a 72-year-old local activist fighting the biomass industry in Northampton County, North Carolina: "*I use the term dumping ground to describe our area…We're predominantly Black, and big industries feel that they can do what they want*".

Isn't Drax developing carbon capture?

No, they are not. In 2024, Drax did get development consent for a carbon capture unit linked to its power station. However, they have done nothing further to develop or test this technology, even though large-scale carbon capture from burning wood has not been demonstrated anywhere in the world so far. As early as 2023, Drax's CEO announced that the company would put investment into carbon capture on hold. In its 2025 Annual Report, Drax once again says that it has refocussed its investment plans away from BECCS (Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage).

Even if Drax was to capture CO_2 from its power station in future, this would not make the power station "carbon negative" or even "carbon neutral. As research by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) shows: "*When proper carbon accounting is done, the cumulative emissions from BECCS alone are projected to surpass the U.K.'s total emissions from all other sources by the late 2040s"*. And, of course, carbon capture cannot make the logging of biodiverse forests from around the world to produce the wood pellets burned environmentally sustainable. Nor can it mitigate the damage caused to local communities, especially environmental justice communities, that are disproportionately affected by the biomass industry.

What's fuelling the problem?

Drax's operations are heavily subsidised — and the money comes directly from our energy bills. In 202f, Drax received £999 million in subsidies - that's more than £2.7 million every single day - all paid for through a levy on consumers' energy bills. This levy is intended to support renewable energy and reduce the UK's carbon emissions, but because of the carbon accounting loophole, it is instead being used to subsidise the burning of trees at Drax. Drax's existing subsidies run out in March 2027.

However, in November 2025, Drax signed a new subsidies contract, approved by the Government. Those subsidies will run from 2027 to 2031 and cover Drax burning less than half as much wood annually as they have in recent years.

Data centres: Could Drax end up burning more wood than what they'll be getting subsidies for in future?

This is certainly what Drax is hoping for. In June 2025, Drax submitted a joint bid to the government with York University, North Yorkshire and the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority for an AI Growth Zone. The Government has invited such bids and approved four of them as of April 2026 - not so far including the bid involving Drax. AI Growth Zones are for at least 500 MW of data centre capacities, with data centre operators guaranteed preferential access to electricity as well as support with planning applications. Furthermore, Drax is working on a planning application for a 100 MW data centre sited next to the power station. If Drax succeeds in partnering with a data centre provider willing to enter into a supply contract, then this would mean extra income to allow Drax to burn even more trees than they will otherwise be able to from 2027.

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