Press release: Campaigners urge Government not to grant new funding for AI data centres powered by Drax's tree burning

BIOFUELWATCH & STOP BURNING TREES COALITION PRESS RELEASE

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Campaigners urge Government not to grant new funding for AI data centres powered by Drax's tree burning

Today 63 organisations including Friends of the Earth EWNI and Greenpeace, alongside local Yorkshire based groups and international environmental organisations have written to Secretary of State Peter Kyle to urge the Government to not fund the UK's single largest carbon emitter, Drax, to power AI data centres.[1]

Drax, in partnership with North Yorkshire Combined Authority, North Yorkshire Council and the University of York, have applied to the Department for Science Innovation and Technology to become an "Artificial Intelligence Growth Zone" which DSIT opened applications for last month. [2]

Last month, MPs voted in favour of Government legislation to use UK energy bills to extend Drax's subsidies. When these subsidies were first announced Michael Shanks stated that they "will ensure Drax plays a much more limited role in the system, providing low carbon dispatchable power only when it is really needed" and that "Drax will be supported to operate at a maximum load factor of just 27% – operating less than half as much as it currently does."[5]

Drax is claiming that it will use CCS to be an 'AI and clean energy campus'. Yet neither Drax nor anyone else has the technical know-how to capture carbon from woody biomass burning at scale, mass redundancies have recently been made by Drax backed company C-Capture, [3] and scientists from across the globe have raised the alarm on BECCS.[4] There is nothing clean or green about this proposal.

If this bid was to be successful, the Energy Minister's assurances to Parliament would effectively be overturned and Drax would continue to operate at far greater than a 27% load factor, i.e. burn significantly more wood than foreseen by DESNZ.

Last year, Drax emitted over 13 million tonnes of CO2 [6], 3.5% of the UK's total emissions [7], and burned 7.3 million tonnes of wood [6], much of it from the clear-felling of biodiverse forests in the Southern USA, Canada and Europe. BBC Panorama investigations have found that Drax is continuing to log primary, previously untouched forests in British Columbia in Canada [8] and the company has failed more than once to report that it is sourcing wood to burn from Canadian primary forests.[9]

Katy Brown from Biofuelwatch said: "*It's bad enough that the government has agreed to extend subsidies to Drax, the UK's largest carbon emitter and the world's biggest tree burner, now we face the prospect of Drax gaining even more money to burn even more trees through this ill thought out AI data centre bid. There will be nothing clean or green about this venture, it will be another income stream for Drax to continue harming forests, wildlife, communities and forests and a distraction from the transition to genuinely renewable, non-emissive energy sources.*"

Merry Dickinson from the Stop Burning Trees Coalition added: "*The Government has already taken the disastrous decision to extend Drax's tree burning past its 2027 cut off date until 2031; based on the promise Drax would be burning half as many trees. Using Drax to power a data centre would be another broken promise and spell disaster for forests, communities and our planet. Our future will not be built on burning trees, we need real green jobs for Yorkshire and across the UK that put workers and communities first*."

Claire James from the Campaign Against Climate Change stated"*This summer's heatwaves are just a small foretaste of what we can expect if we don't reduce global emissions urgently. Meanwhile, Labour is gambling on AI as an economic fix - but they are also gambling with the climate because of AI's high energy demand. The government is well aware that burning wood for power is highly polluting, and they should also know that Drax's carbon capture promises are vague and implausible. Burning trees as fuel cannot be the future, it should be firmly put in the past*."

Ellen Robottom from the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Justice Coalition said: "*Using bioenergy from Drax to power a data centre would result in a devastating combination of long-term lock-in of a power source known to be highly polluting, and a massive increase in the requirement for power, making it impossible to meet the government's stated aim to decarbonise the power system."*

Notes to Editors:

Please see the full text of the letter and signing organisations here.

The government announced that applications for Artificial Intelligence Growth Zones were open in May, with the government stating earlier this year in its 10 year infrastructure strategy that it would make £2 billion available to deliver its AI Opportunities Action Plan

Drax is bidding to use CCS to become an 'AI and clean energy campus' in collaboration with North Yorkshire Council, the University of York and the North Yorkshire Combined Authority.

1. Open Letter: Say no to the UK government funding Drax to power data centres – biofuelwatch

2. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c771gpyp5vzo
3. C-Capture: Mass redundancies at Yorkshire carbon capture firm backed by Government, Drax and bp
4. A-Statement-by-Scientists-on-BECCS-FINAL-for-Submission-with-signatures.pdf
5. https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-02-10/debates/25021013000012/DraxPowerStationBiomass
6. Drax_AR2024_Interactive.pdf
7. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67e4060df356a2dc0e39b4cd/2024-provisional-greenhouse-gas-emissions-statistics-statistical-release.pdf
8. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-68381160
9. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdxnpzzjed1o