No overexploitation of forests for a wrong energy turnaround

Forests are irreplaceable for the protection of biodiversity and our climate, they are the basis of life for humans, animals and plants. Nevertheless, global forest ecosystems are under threat. There are many reasons for this - from illegal logging to the expansion of agricultural land and high raw material requirements of the pulp and paper industry. As a result, forests are being cut down, overused or converted into monoculture timber plantations.

Now the forests are coming under additional pressure in the name of climate protection. One reason for this is the EU‘s wrong decision to consider the burning of wood as climate-neutral. This gives the EU member states the opportunity to subsidize wood biomass for electricity and heat production as a climate protection measure.

It is now to be feared that the energetic use of wood biomass on a large scale will also be further promoted in Germany. The Federal Government intends to introduce the relevant laws and regulations for this before the end of 2020:

- The amendment of the Renewable Energy Act is being discussed in the Bundestag. The draft law provides for higher subsidies for electricity generated from biomass and the annual expansion target is to be significantly increased from the current 200 MW to 500 MW.
- By the end of the year, the federal government intends to complete the regulation on the promotion of renewable heat. Here too, clear incentives for the use of wood as an energy source are planned.
- Within the framework of the Coal Exit Act, the Federal Government intends to launch a support program for the conversion of coal-fired power plants to biomass by the end of 2020.

The pressure on the forest is not only increased by a wrong understanding of climate protection through biomass. These debates are being fired up by international investors in German power plants that may burn woody biomass or the US wood pellet giant Enviva, who is trying hard to lobby the political landscape in Germany.

Even in the German forestry sector, which is trying to sell large stocks of trees that dies because of drought and bark beetle infestation, voices are becoming louder in favor of the industrial use of wood biomass in energy production. There is a danger here that the installed plants will be operated in the long term with imported wood biomass, even from questionable sources, after the damaged wood has been used up within a few years.

The use of wood biomass as fuel for energy production is considered problematic for the following reasons:

1. Contrary to popular opinion, the burning of wood is not climate-neutral. The energetic use of wood contributes significantly to the greenhouse effect beyond the time periods relevant to tackle the climate crisis. The time needed by forests to re-absorb carbon emissions from energetic wood use may amount to many decades. At the same time, more intensive utilization reduces the ability of forests to sequester carbon in the long term. In addition, burning wood produces more CO_2 per unit of energy than burning fossil fuels.

2. To meet the raw material requirements for power plants run on woody biomass, operators are on a global shopping spree. Environmental organizations from the US or the Baltic States are already sounding the alarm because forests there could end up as fuel in German power plants. Countries from the global south are also in focus here: Vattenfall narrowly failed with its plans to burn wood from Liberia in its Berlin power plants and in Hamburg bushwood from Namibia is to be used for energy production.

3. Increased demand for wood is not good news for German forests either. Increased felling quantities would further weaken the local forest ecosystems and impair their functions for climate protection and biodiversity. For ecological reasons, there are no quantities of wood in Germany that are still freely available. The annual growth of wood is almost completely harvested and for many years a substantial part of the harvested wood has already been burned. At the same time, deadwood is missing in the forest as an important structural element for biodiversity, nutrient availability and humus formation. We would have to leave much more wood in the forest for climate and species protection.

4. The burning of woody biomass also contradicts the principle of cascading use, to which the German government has committed itself in its Bioeconomy Strategy. According to this, wood should first be used as a material in long-life products and only be burned for energy production at the end of the respective life cycle.

5. The use of woody biomass is only made possible with massive public funding. For the conversion of the RWE coal-fired power plant in Geertruidenburg in the

Netherlands, the energy giant is receiving over 1.7 billion euros in subsidies. Investors in Germany are also already speculating on generous public support for the use of biomass in energy production.

6. In this context, sustainability certificates are not suitable to adequately counter the negative effects of woody biomass combustion. Even if wood from sustainable forestry is burned, it contributes to the increase of the CO_2 content in the atmosphere and thus to the climate crisis. Furthermore, certificates do not prevent the further expansion of this unsustainable energy production.

We must adapt forestry to the planetary limits and handle the valuable raw material wood with care. Direct combustion is the worst solution. The political leaders at federal and state level should therefore stop the further expansion of industrial wood biomass energy production and not waste public money on this false climate protection.

Signatories:

This joint position was initiiated by „Zivilgesellschaftlichen Aktionsforum Bioökonomie“ and Plattform Wald Klima.
More information on www.aktionsforum-biooekonomie.de and www.plattform-wald-klima.de

Date 24.11.2020