

Open Letter calling on the UK Government to redirect renewable subsidies from biomass burning to genuinely renewable energy

To: Alok Sharma, Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, and Kwasi Kwarteng, Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth

24th November 2020

Dear Mr Sharma and Mr Kwarteng

The UK spends well over £1 billion a year subsidising burning trees for electricity, with most of the wood shipped in in the form of pellets sourced from high carbon, biodiverse forests¹ overseas. The UK's demand for wood-fuelled electricity contributes to climate change,² forest degradation³ and environmental injustice,⁴ and is destroying the habitats of many at-risk animals and plants.

A major expansion of the wood pellet industry is now underway,⁵ supported by subsidies in the UK and several other European countries. The UK remains the world's biggest wood pellet importer.

Therefore, we urge you to initiate proceedings to remove subsidies paid to companies that burn solid biomass for electricity under the Renewables Obligation scheme, and redirect the money to support genuinely renewable wind, solar and wave/tidal power.

Keeping forests standing must be a priority of all governments seeking to address the climate emergency. Burning wood in power stations threatens that priority by leading to more forests being felled. In January 2018, 800 scientists set out the climate impacts of burning wood in an Open Letter to the EU Parliament:

*'Even if forests are allowed to regrow, using wood deliberately harvested for burning will increase carbon in the atmosphere and warming for decades to centuries – [...] even when wood replaces coal, oil or natural gas. The reasons are fundamental and occur regardless of whether forest management is "sustainable".'*⁶

1 https://www.southernenvironment.org/uploads/publications/Biomass_Biodiversity_white_paper.pdf

2 <https://easac.eu/media-room/press-releases/details/easac-s-environmental-experts-call-for-international-action-to-restrict-climate-damaging-forest-bioenergy-schemes/>

3 <https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Biomass-Investigation-Booklet-2019.pdf>

4 <https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wood-Pellet-Environmental-Justice-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

5 <https://environmentalpaper.org/2018/11/new-data-reveals-shocking-scale-of-planned-forest-biomass-industry-growth/>

6 http://www.pfpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/UPDATE-800-signatures_Scientist-Letter-on-EU-Forest-Biomass.pdf

Moreover, burning wood causes air pollution comparable to burning coal⁷ and new research has found that burning trees from so-called 'sustainably managed forests' increases CO₂ pollution in the atmosphere for more than 40 years.⁸ This is well beyond the timeframe critical to tackle the climate emergency.

Moreover, Drax, which gets over £2.1 million in renewable energy subsidies every day, routinely burns pellets sourced from clearcuts of mature coastal hardwood forests in the Southeastern USA,⁹ forests which lie at the heart of a global biodiversity hotspot.¹⁰

We believe we have a responsibility to act on climate change and to ensure that the UK can meet our international commitments to work towards keeping global temperature rises to 1.5°C.

In 2018, the government made a positive first step by effectively ruling out new subsidies¹¹ for large-scale biomass electricity that is dependent on imported wood. However, existing biomass power stations are due to continue receiving subsidies until 2027.

Fortunately, most of these subsidies can be stopped through secondary legislation. This would free up hundreds of millions a year which, under the Levy Control Framework, must then be spent on genuinely clean and renewable energy.

Sincerely,

2G3S: Green Groups in the Shelfords, Stapleford and Sawston

Australian Forests and Climate Alliance

Avon Needs Trees

Biofuelwatch

Bomenstichting Achterhoek

Breaking the Frame

Breathe Clean Air Group

Brighton Climate Action Network

Bristol Energy Network

Bristol Friends of the Earth

Camden Greenpeace

Campaign Against Climate Change

Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union group

Carbon Watchdog

⁷ <http://www.pfpi.net/air-pollution-2>

⁸ https://www.southernenvironment.org/uploads/publications/2019-05-27_Drax_emissions_-_SIG_report_Phase_II.PDF

⁹ <https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Biomass-Investigation-Booklet-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.cepf.net/stories/announcing-worlds-36th-biodiversity-hotspot-north-american-coastal-plain>

¹¹ <https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2018/cfd-press-release/>

Cardiff Greenpeace
Climate SOS: Shift Our Subsidies
Coal Action Network
Colombia Solidarity Campaign
Doncaster Green party
Earth Thrive
Extinction Rebellion Aberystwyth
Extinction Rebellion Bangor
Extinction Rebellion Chippenham
Extinction Rebellion Conwy
Extinction Rebellion Crawley
Extinction Rebellion Hounslow
Extinction Rebellion Keynsham
Extinction Rebellion Liverpool
Extinction Rebellion Machynlleth
Extinction Rebellion Oswestry
Extinction Rebellion Punks
Extinction Rebellion Shrewsbury
Extinction Rebellion Tower Hamlets
Extinction Rebellion UK
Extinction Rebellion Youth Cambridge
Extinction Telford
Falmouth Greenpeace
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Frack Off London
Friends of the Earth Bristol
Friends of the Earth Cambridge
Friends of the Earth Ealing
Friends of the Earth Hull
Friends of the Earth Manchester
Friends of the Earth North Tyneside
Friends of the Earth Pembrokeshire
Friends of the Earth Tunbridge Wells
Global Justice Glasgow
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Greater Fishponds Energy Group
Green Christian

Greener Practice
Greenpeace Exeter
Kirklees Campaign Against Climate Change
Mind Your Wildlife Manors
Mums for Lungs
Operation Noah
Public and Commercial Services Union
Residents Against Dirty Energy
Reforest the Earth, UK
Repowering London
Resurgence Dorset
Sustainable Blewbury
SUSTAINABLE DORSET / DORSET AGENDA 21
The C.H.E.E.S.E Project CIC
Thetford River Group
Transition Edinburgh
Transition Minehead and Alcombe
Transition Town Brixton
Transition Town Kingston
Treesponsibility
UK Without Incineration Network
UK Youth Climate Coalition
Upper Valley Affinity Group
Weald Action Group