

International open letter: Oppose Drax coal to biomass conversion plans

by Biofuelwatch
Wednesday, 24 April 2013

Converting coal plants to burn biomass only replaces one disaster with another.

DRAX, (and some other large coal burning utilities in the UK and elsewhere), seek to convert half of their facility to burn wood pellets in place of coal. The aim is to extend the lifespan of what is the UK's biggest coal power station by getting around new EU sulphur dioxide regulations that would otherwise require them to shut down.

Not only do they get a "new lease on life", but they also receive subsidies for this ploy since biomass burning is classified and supported lavishly as "renewable energy". DRAX plans would require burning pellets made from nearly 16 million green tonnes of wood every year, and they are not the only utility following this course: Planning consents have already been granted to 5 UK facilities (Tilbury B, Ironbridge, Drax, Eggborough, Alcan Lynemouth) which in total would burn pellets manufactured from nearly 50 million green tonnes of wood annually. Almost all of this wood is to be imported given that UK's total domestic wood harvest, for all purposes, is only about 10 million green tonnes per year. These utilities are seeking supplies of wood from around the globe, putting the future of forests at ever greater risk.

Burning coal and other fossil fuels must stop, but biomass cannot provide a substitute. DRAX and other UK utilities should halt their conversion plans and UK government must reverse course to avert catastrophic impacts on forests, climate and people.

Background:

Air pollution: While emissions from biomass burning are overall comparable to those from coal, biomass does have lower SO₂ emissions. Currently, the EU is strengthening regulations for SO₂ emissions and UK power stations have the worst record on SO₂ emissions across the EU. Old coal burning facilities like DRAX therefore seek to meet the new SO₂ standards by substituting biomass for coal in at least some of their units DRAX coal conversion plan only covers half of their generating capacity, so by enabling the facility to stay in operation, biomass burning is in effect extending coal burning on into the future.

Climate: While industry proponents, and their friends in governments continue to claim that biomass is "carbon neutral" this has been soundly and repeatedly refuted. In fact smokestack emissions from biomass burning are even higher than those from burning coal, per unit of energy. There is simply no guarantee that new trees will grow and re-sequester carbon. Even if they do, trees grow slowly, over decades or even centuries creating a very long "carbon debt". This means converting from coal to burning trees could result in an increase of carbon emissions above and beyond even that which would occur from continuing to burn coal for the relevant and foreseeable near term future. Further, the loss of forest cover, impacts on soils, emissions from harvest and transport all contribute to further impacts. If biodiverse and carbon-rich forests, grasslands or other ecosystems are turned into monoculture tree plantation, the carbon released will remain

in the atmosphere long term. And as experience with biofuels has shown, the indirect impacts of creating such a vast new demand can be even more serious than the direct ones.

++Human rights and land: Like other forms of bioenergy, the massive demand for biomass is spurring more speculative investment in land. Land grabs for biofuels are already well documented and include rising incidence of violent conflicts as peoples are displaced and forced to move elsewhere for their livelihoods.

++Biodiversity, soils and water: Vast new demand for biomass resulting from these coal-to-biomass conversions will drive further expansion of industrial monoculture tree plantations at the expense of remaining biodiverse ecosystems, and depleting soils and waterways. Demand for "fast growing" trees is touted as rationale for development and commercial deployment of genetically engineered tree species, as well as cultivation of various invasive species, which threaten to replace and/or cross-contaminate native species. UK utility companies have targeted the southeastern United States and Canada so far for most of their pellet supplies and some, including DRAX, E.On and RWE are either investing in their own pellet manufacture facilities in those regions for export to UK or entering into long-term agreements with suppliers which are building large new pellet plants as a result. Whole trees are cut and pelletized specifically for the purpose. Some pellets are sourced from the Baltic States, South Africa, Russia and Portugal and utilities are looking to access wood from Brazil, Central and West Africa and beyond in the longer term.

UK utilities have succeeded in garnering massive subsidies to convert to biomass burning, in the form of "Renewable Obligation Certificates". As is the case in other countries, biomass burning is subsidized as "clean, green and renewable" in spite of clear and mounting evidence that it most certainly is not. The implications are dire.

We oppose commercial and industrial scale bioenergy, and demand that the UK halt coal conversion plans and force these coal plants to shut down. Meanwhile focus must be redirected towards a serious reduction of energy consumption and dramatic measures to protect and restore forests and other ecosystems.

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Signatories:

Begegnungszentrum, Austria

Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, US

Buckeye Forest Council, Ohio, US

Carbon Trade Watch, International

Center for Biological Diversity, US

Centre for Research and Documentation Chile-Latin America (FDCL), Germany

Chipstop, NSW, Australia

Citizens for a Clean Healthy Economy, US

COECEIBA (FOE Costa Rica), Costa Rica

Don't Waste Arizona, Arizona, US

Earth Peoples, International

Echo Verlag, Germany

Eine-Welt-Gruppe Los Andes, Germany

Energiehunger-Nein Danke (NGO Network), Germany
Energy Justice Network, US
ETC Group, International
FOE Germany (BUND), Germany
Friends of the Earth International
Freunde der Naturvögel e.V. , Germany
Friends of the Siberian Forest, Russia
Global Justice Ecology Project, International
Global Forest Coalition, International
Green Delaware, Delaware, US
Huon Valley Environment Center, Tasmania, Australia
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Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste, Chiapas, Mexico
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Salva la Selva, Spain
Save The Eagles International, US
Save Wildlife Conservation Fund, Germany
Society for Dolphin Conservation, Germany
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Timberwatch, South Africa
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