

Biofuelwatch UK Newsletter March 2013

New Biofuelwatch campaign against Coal-to-Biomass conversions in the UK – and funding appeal for this

By far the largest biomass investments in the UK – all of them reliant on imported wood from trees cut down for that purpose – are going into conversions of coal power stations. So far, five power stations have planning consent for full or partial conversions (Tilbury B, the only one to have converted already, Ironbridge, Drax, Eggborough and Lynemouth). Between them, they would need to burn almost five times as much wood as the UK produces in total every year. This is twice as many wood pellets as were produced worldwide in 2010. So far, most imported wood for UK power stations is coming from North America, where biodiverse native forests are being clearcut at an ever faster rate. In future, more wood pellets are expected to come from monoculture tree plantations in the global South, which will mean more land-grabbing and displacement of communities, more water grabbing and more destruction of forests and other ecosystems. The Government has admitted the true reasons why those conversions are being supported: *"The conversion of existing coal generating plant to biomass or higher levels of biomass co-firing is a way of keeping open some existing coal plant that would otherwise close before 2016 under environmental legislation, and therefore improve capacity margins over this decade."*

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldsecleg/123/12306.htm>)

Biomass is thus not an alternative to coal but to closing down power stations and the Government's reasons for supporting this are all about keeping those power stations open. For more information, see www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/uk-campaign/coal-biomass-conversions/.

We have started the campaign with an alert to the Green Investment Bank, protesting against their \$100 million loan to Drax to finance their partial biomass conversion and calling on them to commit to not funding big biomass in future: www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/green-bank-alert/. Since launching the alert, we have been invited to a meeting with the GIB and will report back on that in our next newsletter.

And on 24th April, we are organising a protest outside the Drax AGM – Taking DRAXtic Action. Please come along and help spread the word: www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/taking-draxtic-action/. More details to be announced soon on that webpage.

Can you help us fund our campaign against the major biomass investments which Drax, E.On, RWE and Eggborough are making to keep their polluting, inefficie power stations running? Any donations towards it would be greatly appreciated and will help to cover the cost of the campaign. Regular monthly donations, however small, would be particular helpful but one-off ones would be great, too. To make a donation to Biofuelwatch, please go to www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/donate/.

Updates on individual power station proposals:

Thanks to everybody who objected to the proposed biofuel power station in Shoreham-on-Sea. The application has not yet been decided. Nor have any of Forth Energy's applications in Scotland been determined. Unfortunately, Thurrock Council has granted RWE's application for the expansion and continued operation of Tilbury B as a biomass

power station. Though disappointing, the decision came as no surprise given the Government's strong support for such investments. The local media gave good coverage to the concerns about the likely disastrous impacts on forests and climate.

Subsidies for biofuel and biomass power stations:

Sadly, there is no good news as far as the campaigns against subsidies (Renewable Obligation Certificates or ROCs) for biofuel and biomass power stations are concerned.

Despite a very strong campaign by lots of people and several organisations, DECC's proposal have now been rubber-stamped by a parliamentary committee. The BBC in particular gave significant coverage to concerns over biofuel electricity (e.g. www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21692673). Although the concerns were brought up by some MPs during the debate, Energy Minister John Hayes refused any amendment. Earlier that day, he said that CO2 was not all that mattered and dismissed concerns over biofuels, hunger and rainforest destruction as 'bourgeois'! Long-term biomass subsidies have been approved, too, as part of the same Order.

In Scotland, the Government has proposed a 15 MW cap on subsidised electricity-only biomass power stations – but offers so many exemptions and loopholes that any large biomass power station, including those proposed by Forth Energy, could still attract subsidies. We have been working closely with Friends of the Earth Scotland and community campaigners to try and get those proposals changed. At a recent Parliamentary Debate, MSPs from all parties expressed concerns over those loopholes but so far the Scottish Government has refused to amend the proposal. The relevant Parliamentary Committee decided to hear evidence (including from Biofuelwatch) and fully debate those concerns. We will report back after their final vote.

Both governments' stance appears to reflect the massive lobbying power by big energy companies who are set to earn up to £3 billion a year from ROCs for biomass (and less, but still substantial amounts, for ROCs for biofuels) – and an obsession with 'keeping the lights on', which means not addressing energy demand. The good news is that subsidy rules could, legally, be changed again at any time since they do not require primary legislation. Yet clearly, this will require a much stronger challenge to energy companies' power over energy, including 'renewable energy' policies across the UK.

And finally some good news...

Back in October 2010, Biofuelwatch and Rainforest Rescue supported local campaigners in Hawaii with a large international petition against plans by Hawaii's largest energy company (HECO) to burn very large amounts of palm oil for electricity. At the time, HECO had been granted permission for a 'trial' to burn 2.56 million gallons of palm oil in two power stations. Although the trial went ahead despite protests (after all, HECO had already purchased the palm oil for it), their much larger long-term plans for burning palm oil did not. Those plans would have turned HECO into one of the biggest palm oil importers in North America and surpassed all existing palm oil power station capacity worldwide. Yet since the 'trial', likely due to local, national and international protests, we understand that no palm oil has been burned for electricity in Hawaii. See: <http://www.rainforest-rescue.org/achievements/4852/success-as-hawaii-s-largest-energy-company-halts-palm-oil-use-in-power-stations>