

Scottish Government biomass subsidy proposal “poses major threat to forests, communities and Scotland’s climate targets”

Press release by Friends of the Earth Scotland, Biofuelwatch, Grangemouth Community Council and Save our Speyside

Embargoed until 16th November 2012

On the day a key consultation about future subsidies for biomass in Scotland closes [1], Friends of the Earth Scotland, Biofuelwatch and community groups are warning that Scottish Government proposals pose a major threat to Scotland’s climate change targets and to forests and communities around the world.

The Scottish Government publicly acknowledges that there are limits to the amount of wood and other biomass which can be burnt sustainably and that support for bioenergy should focus on small-scale, high-efficiency heat and combined heat and power [2]. Yet, although it proposes a cap on electricity-only biomass power stations, this cap would come with such major loopholes that environmental campaigners consider it to be effectively meaningless [3]. Provided they supply a small amount of heat, large wood-fired power stations with as little as 35% efficiency would be classed as ‘combined heat and power’ (CHP) and exempt from the cap [4]. As a result, they could attract hundreds of millions of pounds in public subsidy in future, despite only achieving half the efficiency level of 70% required by the EU for CHP. Groups fear that, if subsidy plans go ahead, they will give the green light to millions of tonnes of wood being imported from the Americas and elsewhere to be burnt in Scottish power stations such as those proposed by Forth Energy in Grangemouth, Dundee and Rosyth [5].

“Cutting down vast numbers of trees, shipping them across the Atlantic and burning them in Scottish power stations is a disaster for forests and climate, as well as for communities dependent on forests in the Americas and for Scottish communities who will suffer more extreme air pollution as a result. Calling such power stations ‘combined heat and power’ when they waste nearly two out of three trees that have been cut down through uncaptured heat is dangerously misleading”, says Almuth Ernsting, Co-Director of Biofuelwatch. “The waste of public funding for such inefficient energy production is scandalous.”

The Southern US is turning into one of the main regions exporting wood pellets for UK power stations. According to US conservation NGO Dogwood Alliance, the Scottish Government’s proposals pose a major threat to the threatened biodiverse forests of that region: “I have visited pellet plants across the southern US which are gearing up to supply power stations operated by Forth Energy and others in the UK and I have seen the constant stream of trucks carrying whole trees to be turned into pellets. Native forests, rich in wildlife, are being clearcut and turned into fuel for large UK power stations. The Scottish Government has a choice: They can set an example and stop that madness, or will become another big actor in the destruction of southern US forests and accelerating climate change.”

There is growing scientific consensus that large wood-fired power stations, which rely on trees being cut down (rather than waste wood), will have a worse impact on the climate over the coming decades or centuries than the fossil fuels they might replace [6]. Yet the Scottish Government’s carbon accounting proposals ignore this evidence.

“The Scottish Government must urgently revise its plans and make sure that renewable energy subsidies go towards genuine renewable energy, such as sustainable wind and tidal power –not towards cutting down and burning other countries’ forests at a huge cost to people, wildlife and climate” says Andrew Llanwarne member of the Friends of the Earth Scotland Board.

Contacts:

Almuth Ernsting, Biofuelwatch, Tel 0131-6232600

Andrew Llanwarne, Friends of the Earth Scotland, Tel 01382 732457, or mobile 0791 294 5325

Scot Quaranda, Dogwood Alliance, US: scot@dogwoodalliance.org, Tel 001 – 828 – 242 3596

Notes:

[1] The Renewables Obligation Banding Review Supplementary Consultation can be downloaded from www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Business-Industry/Energy/Obligation-12-13/ROConsultationOct2010. The deadline for the crucial part of the consultation which looks at the remit of the proposed cap on electricity-only biomass power stations is Friday, 16th November.

[2] See for example “Call for a Biomass Rethink”, Scottish Government, November 2011:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/10/28105521>

[3] A Parliamentary Briefing about the proposals and loopholes produced by Biofuelwatch, Friends of the Earth Scotland, No Leith Biomass and Grangemouth Community Council can be found at

<http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2012/scottish-parliament-briefing-rocs/>

[4] Under the Renewables Obligation, biomass power stations are classed as ‘good quality CHP’ if they achieve just 35% overall efficiency, regardless of their size. See DECC Guidance Note 44 which the Scottish Government decided in 2009 to apply in Scotland, too:

www.chpqa.com/guidance_notes/GUIDANCE_NOTE_44.pdf. This document should be read in conjunction with the CHP Quality Assurance Standard:

www.chpqa.com/guidance_notes/documents/CHPQA_Standard_Issue3.

[5] Although Forth Energy has withdrawn its biomass power station proposals for Leith, its applications in Dundee, Grangemouth and Rosyth are still pending. Forth Energy has publicly stated that it believes those power stations, which would burn 3.5 million tonnes of wood a year in total, would meet the Scottish Government’s definition of ‘combined heat and power’ and thus, by implication, be exempt from the proposed cap on subsidies for electricity-only biomass power stations.

[6] For a list of key scientific publications about the carbon impacts of wood-based bioenergy, see the Scientific Articles listed at www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/resources-on-biomass/.