

This is the August edition of our monthly newsletter, with details of recent news from bioenergy campaigns. Please let us know if you would like more information about particular campaign issues/news. And if you are looking for news about biomass campaigning in the US, then please see <http://energyjustice.net/biomass/monitor>

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1. Tell Defra: Don't blow off air pollution testing!

Take part in the alert here: <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/defraalert/>

Air pollution in the UK reduces average life expectancy by two years and contributes to up to 200,000 early deaths every year, according to a government advisory body. Biomass expansion alone has been predicted to cause the loss of up to 1.75 million life years by 2020, according to a study commissioned by the last Government. The Supreme Court has confirmed that the Government is in breach of EU requirements to reduce air pollution levels.

Instead of reducing air pollution, Defra want to cover it up by dismantling air quality monitoring and reporting across England. In a consultation that runs until 13th September, Defra proposes four options which range from weakening to entirely abolishing requirements for local authority air quality monitoring and reporting. Their preferred option would likely see less than 100 air quality monitors out of around 600 retained, according to Defra's own Impact Assessment. Defra claims that this will help local authorities focus on 'actions' rather than reporting and monitoring – but if there is no local data to show where air quality limits are being breached, there will (as far as the Government is concerned) be no need for action.

Without sufficient air quality data, communities would have no hope of stopping planning applications for polluting developments because of the risk they pose to public health – whether they are biomass power stations, waste incinerators, fossil fuel power stations or new roads.

We have launched an alert asking people to write to Defra. Please take part in it here <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/defraalert/>, and ask your friends and colleagues to do the same.

2. Important vote on biofuels policy in EU Parliament on 11th September

On 11th September, MEPs will be voting on possible changes to EU biofuels policy. There is now overwhelming evidence that EU biofuels targets and subsidies have had disastrous impacts on the climate, on the number of people going hungry, on land-grabbing and human rights, on forests and other ecosystems and on freshwater and healthy soils. Voting against all biofuel targets, subsidies and other incentives should therefore be imperative – but sadly, that voting option is not even expected to be put before MEPs.

Industries with vested biofuel interests have launched a major lobbying campaign and have been misinforming policy makers in order to secure their own financial interests. For background information about their lobbying, see <http://corporateeurope.org/news/food-fuels-last-chance-lobbying-agrofuels-industry-0> .

As a result, it seems likely that the 'best' option that MEPs will be able to vote for is a 5% cap on "crop-based biofuels", including ones from the main current biofuel feedstocks, including soya, maize, palm oil, oilseed rape and sugar cane. So-called second-generation biofuels (i.e. biofuels produced from solid biomass such as wood) would be exempt from the cap, even though they could result in yet more industrial tree plantations with the same serious impacts as oil palm plantations. However, second-generation biofuels remain in the research and development stages and are not so far economically viable (even with subsidies and targets). Therefore a 5% cap would clearly be significantly less bad than a higher cap.

Given the strength of industry lobbying for a much higher cap – and thus for even more land grabbing and land conversions to biofuels – calling on MEPs to vote for damage limitation is therefore crucial.

We will forward an alert to MEPs by another organisation (Down to Earth) on this list in the next few days and will encourage people to take part in it.

In the meantime, we would recommend reading this report about EU biofuels policy and its impact on land and water grabbing worldwide: <http://www.econexus.info/node/185> .

3. UK Conversions Update: Tilbury B closes but Drax burns more wood than ever

NPower/RWE have announced that Tilbury B, the first coal to biomass conversion in the UK, has closed for good. While this is certainly good news for forests, the official reasons for the decision to close the power station after such huge investments were made into it appear unconvincing to us. We suspect that the costs arising from the fire and future explosion risks, such as the insurance that they would need to cover them, may have been a factor.

Drax on the other hand has now converted its first unit to wood pellets and begun generating electricity from it. On top of this, it has entered into an agreement with Rentech which will see the start of pellet exports from Ontario - 4 million tonnes over 10 years - threatening forests in yet another region where clearcutting and the conversion of biodiverse forests to plantations is a major concern.

4. Why Government claims about capping support for dedicated biomass power stations and about biomass sustainability standards can't be believed

What's behind the headline "Britain to limit funding for new power-only biomass plants"?

In July there were several media reports about the UK government supposedly having announced that support for electricity-only biomass power stations will be capped. Unfortunately, the headlines were misleading.

First of all, there has been no Government announcement about limiting funding for any type of biomass at all. And secondly, the exemptions from any possible 'cap' on electricity-only biomass are such that they make the whole debate/proposal entirely meaningless. Yes, the Renewable Energy Association is complaining loudly, but it appears that this is purely an attempt to maintain control of (bio)energy policy developments by energy firms.

Although one article (<http://planetark.org/wen/69263>) cites Energy Minister Ed Davey as criticising electricity from imported wood, if that really is his view it has not been reflected in actual policy

announcements. Here's what's actually happened:

+ Back in 2012, the Government proposed a 400 MW cap on electricity-only biomass that would be eligible for subsidies under the current subsidies regime, i.e. Renewables Obligation Certificates. However, they then announced that no such cap would be included in the new legislation. The latest announcement says that they may eventually consult on whether or not to keep open the option of in future withdrawing subsidies for such new power stations. Hardly a newsworthy announcement or change of heart.

+ Separately, a consultation connected with Electricity Market Reform has been published proposing guarantee prices for coal-to-biomass conversions and biomass plants classed as CHP, but not for electricity only biomass power stations. Note that this is only a proposal - the consultation runs until September and the Government has a track record of adjusting any proposals if energy companies complain.

+ But let's assume that the Government really were to go ahead refusing a minimum price guarantee for future electricity-only biomass and perhaps to cap subsidies under the Renewables Obligation for it, too. Does it mean they're actually looking to comply with the Renewable Energy Directive which says that only biomass energy with at least 70% conversion efficiency would be supported (something that would be worth celebrating)? Not at all, because they have exempted: Converted coal-to-biomass power station units (e.g. Drax) which will receive both types of support long-term; any dedicated biomass power station that has EVER been accredited under the Government's CHP Quality Assurance (CHPQA) scheme; and even more bizarrely, biomass power stations are classed as CHP if they're only 'partially accredited'.

In short, it's a myth that the Government has announced or proposed limiting support for low-efficiency biomass power stations.

DECC's revised biomass sustainability criteria are misleading and meaningless

The Department of Energy and Climate Change announced its revised sustainability criteria for the biomass electricity generation industry last week. These criteria once again fail to take into account the majority of emissions from biomass, and encourage the use of flawed sustainability certification schemes. Read our press release here: <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/deccs-revised-biomass-sustainability-criteria-are-misleading-and-meaningless/>

5. Chris Huhne's new job sheds light on cosy relationship between DECC and energy companies

The recent revelation that former Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change Chris Huhne has secured a job worth £100,000 a year with Zilkha Biomass Energy has been met with cynicism by bioenergy campaigners. Chris Huhne is being rewarded for his ardent support for the biomass industry during his time as Energy and Climate Change Secretary. He oversaw vast subsidies and other support mechanisms being put in place for bioenergy which have resulted in a rush for biomass that could see the UK's demand for wood rise to 90 million tonnes a year – nine times the UK's annual production. Plans for coal to biomass power station conversions in the UK alone will create a demand for wood pellets almost double what was produced globally in 2010 – good news for companies like Zilkha who will benefit directly from these misguided renewable energy policies.

Read our press release here: <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/chris-huhnes-new-job-sheds-light-on-cosy-relationship-between-decc-and-energy-companies/>

6. Climate Radio: Biomess

The latest edition of Climate Radio on biomass is available for download

here: <http://climateradio.org/biomess/>

"It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World. European consumption patterns are already responsible for over a third of of global deforestation which is bad news for the climate, biodiversity and forest dependent communities. And yet the UK and Europe have now decided to burn trees to create electricity. Why are policy makers are ignoring the advice of their own scientists which says this will be worse for climate change than burning coal? Where might millions upon millions of tonnes of trees come from and what impacts might this have for exacerbating land grabs and land conflicts?"

Featuring:

Rachel Smolker, Biofuelwatch US, Energy Justice Network
Harry Huyton, Head of climate and energy policy, RSPB
Almuth Ernsting, Biofuelwatch UK
Giuseppe Nastasi, legal advisor at Client Earth

7. Campaign Updates:

Battersea Against Biofuels

Plans for a biofuel (we fear palm oil) CHP plant as part of the Battersea Power Station re-development have not yet been scrapped, but an application has been delayed by a few months. Sime Darby, one of the largest and most controversial palm oil companies in the world, owns 40% of the shares in this development. If you live in London and would like to find out more/get involved with Battersea Against Biofuels, please email Biofuelwatch@ymail.com or go to <https://www.facebook.com/BatterseaAgainstBiofuels>.

Green Investment Bank: Don't fund Forth Energy's destructive Grangemouth biomass power station

Take part in our alert here: <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2013/gib-grangemouth-alert/>

On 3rd June, the Scottish Government approved Forth Energy's consent application for a biomass power station at Grangemouth Port that will burn 1.5 million tonnes of wood. Most of the wood will be imported – likely from North and/or South America. This is the first of three similar planning applications by Forth Energy to be determined – ones for Rosyth and Dundee are still pending (with a Public Local Inquiry expected over the Dundee plans). Now the Green Investment Bank (GIB) is considering whether to help finance the power station. For Forth Energy, a GIB loan may well be key to attracting the private sector loans – which means, without GIB support, the power station might not be built.

Over 1000 people have so far taken part in this alert - but you can still have your say if you haven't done so already. No decision to fund the Grangemouth plant has been taken by the Green Bank so far so there's still time to tell them that they mustn't, and to help spread our alert.