

Wood pellet industry cheats on sustainability, evidence shows

Title

Bioenergy use – energy produced from plants – is soaring in Europe due to the launch of the EU target requiring 20% of the energy used in Europe to come from renewable sources. Forests and other wooded areas are notably being sought after and exploited as they are currently one of the cheapest bioenergy sources. A large part of the EU's wood supply for energy use is imported from the United States, mainly from the south-east region, and its production process is not as sustainable as the industry claims it is.

The south-east US is the world's largest exporter of wood pellets for bioenergy and considered to be the cheapest and most reliable source by many European energy utilities. This new industry is putting increased pressure on the region's forests, already heavily burdened by the paper and pulp industry. **Over the years, the south-eastern region has lost 60% of its natural bottomland hardwood forest**, including areas classified as globally endangered by the WWF such as the south-eastern Mixed Forests and the Middle Atlantic Coastal Forests.

European energy utilities claim that their business is sustainable, but experts and evidence reveal that the wood pellet business exploits whole trees rather than relying on wood residues and is far from being as sustainable as it claims to be. They pretend that their pellets are only sourced from already converted pine tree plantations or from other forest industries residues where strict regulation on forestry always applies. This unfortunately isn't the whole truth.

A **recent study** by three southern universities exposed that one major pellet plant of the company Enviva has a sourcing area where about 60% is made up of hardwood from forested wetlands. From this evidence, it's hard to see how such a plant could be sourcing exclusively from pine plantations and residues. Enviva is one of the largest manufacturers of wood pellets in the United States and supplies companies like E.ON, Drax and Electrabel in Europe.

In the south-eastern US, most forestry relies on private land where zero regulation on forestry practices applies. Large-scale clear cutting is routine and old growth and endangered forests are shown no special consideration. Furthermore, the conversion of natural forest ecosystems into plantations, which is permitted throughout the region, is largely carried out with the extensive use of chemical herbicides. During meetings organised by BirdLife, EU decision makers were presented with the effects of this lack of regulation by the American NGOs **Dogwood Alliance**

, [NRDC](#) and [Southern Environmental Law Center](#). Based on their surprised reactions, it is clear that many politicians are unfortunately unaware of the situation and may be unintentionally and blindly supporting it.

It is becoming evident that the Southeast pellet industry is not exactly dependent on residues, unless pulpwood, whole trees and trunks that can be more than 20 cm in diameter, are all of a sudden classified as residual. According to the forest industry, forests should never undergo a clear cut for energy purposes, but [evidence and images](#) show yards of pellet facilities filled with big tree trunks. It may be true that the most valuable wood is still going to the saw mill industry, but obviously a major and increasingly large portion is being used for pellet production. When presented with facts and figures, most energy companies sourcing from the region seem to be aware of this practice, but would rather not advertise it.

This situation is not only harmful to the forest ecosystems but is also going against our efforts to tackle climate change. [Science](#) and [research by the European Commission](#) have confirmed that burning whole trunks and trees cannot be considered carbon neutral, especially in the short run. As a renewable energy source, wood sourced bioenergy is expected to contribute to Greenhouse Gas savings by 2020. However, due to the slow regrowth of forests and the carbon stock lost, burning whole logs and trees would only deliver savings after decades, and even then, there are high uncertainties on how much recovery would occur.

As unconstrained demand for bioenergy continues to grow in the EU, it is essential for the durability of forests in Europe and abroad to quickly put in place criteria ensuring that plant energy, and especially wood energy, is sustainably produced and efficiently used. Hopefully, as a global environmental frontrunner and key consumer of bioenergy, the EU will take on the responsibility of developing such safeguards and align its bioenergy policies with global efforts to tackle climate change. If we continue to move contrarily, we will put ourselves ever further on the risky path towards environmental disaster.

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