



Joint NGO Consultation Feedback on the Biomass Assurance Framework of the Sustainable Biomass Partnership

1 May 2014

This feedback outlines the key concerns of the signed eight environmental NGOs in relation to the Biomass Assurance Framework (BAF) of the Sustainable Biomass Partnership (SBP), and is submitted as an input to the open consultation of the Framework in April 2014.

The signed NGOs BirdLife Europe, Bond Beter Leefmilieu Vlaanderen, European Environmental Bureau, Dogwood Alliance, Latvian Ornithological Society, Natural Resource Defence Council, the Southern Environmental Law Center and the WWF European Policy Office consider that the framework is not fit for purpose to support serious efforts to tackle the sustainability problems around a significant increase in biomass use for energy.

Most importantly, the vague and loose criteria and indicators of the Sustainable Feedstock Standard and the level of proof required, fail to make the BAF a credible certification scheme capable of reassuring consumers that pellets used do not contribute to environmental and climate damage. The BAF also misses an honest assessment of the most problematic issues related to the sustainability of pellet manufacturing, such as control mechanisms to ensure that timber wood is not used for energy only or to ensure that only low climate impact biomass feedstocks are used.

The main concerns of the NGOs are detailed below. The feedback given focuses on the overall building blocks of the BAF and its credibility. The NGOs defer from more detailed feedback on individual criteria etc. at this stage since given the loose definitions and ambiguity of the overall framework do not allow such an analysis.

Key concepts of sustainability standard are too vague

In the Sustainable Feedstock Standard, which defines sustainability as understood in this framework, only the Indicators of each Criteria are normative. Even if the criteria and indicators show a good intention to cover all the aspects of sustainability, the indicators alone are far too vague and too poorly defined to actually guarantee a level of sustainability and to give an understanding of what is happening on the ground. The standard does provide examples of means of verification and guidance but these are not normative and biomass producers could therefore not be required to use the guidance.

For example indicator 2.6.1 states “The legal, customary and traditional tenure and use rights of indigenous peoples and local communities related to the forest are identified, documented and respected ” without setting any requirements on how sufficient respect should be proven. This leaves it to the biomass producer to decide whether rights of others have been respected or not. A normative requirement of ‘free prior and informed consent’¹ should be included as a minimum, instead of just referring to it as a guidance.

Indicator 2.1.2 states that “The potential threat of forest management to High Conservation Values is minimised. A precautionary approach is adopted.” The standard does not require any kind of definition of HCV, which would be wise, as it is one of the most debated concepts in FSC certification (for example). This gives the biomass producers the liberty to say that all HCVs have been covered by national protected areas, for example, which is rarely the case.

The indicator also does not require producers to conserve HCV but allows their destruction if some evidence can be produced showing that the biomass producers tried to avoid it. In the common sourcing region of the energy utilities involved in the SBP, clear cutting of natural wetland forests is an obviously environmentally destructive practice² but based on our interpretation of the SFS, it would not bring any relief to this problem. An exact definition of HCVs is essential to any credible certification.

Certification at pellet mill level without site inspection is inadequate

The Supply Base Evaluation (SBE) is an effort to evaluate the forest management practices of the contractors of the pellet mill, including the origin of the wood etc. Still, this evaluation can happen and be approved without any kind of verification in the forest neither by the biomass producer itself to check the practices of its contractors or by a third party certification body. The SBP standard 2 (Evaluation of the feedstock against the SFS) suggests that the biomass producer may use third parties such as supplier or harvesting contractors to provide evidence that indicators are low risk but none of this is required. The evaluation can be done as a desk-based exercise only. As a minimum, sample areas within the supply base should be verified on the ground as they would with any forest management certification.

¹ <http://www.forestpeoples.org/guiding-principles/free-prior-and-informed-consent-fpic>

² <http://www.southernenvironment.org/news-and-press/press-releases/statement-from-selc-on-new-report-assessing-threats-to-southeast-wildlife>

The interval of the desk-based SBE is also too long. Undertaking the SBE only every five years does not provide a credible guarantee of sustainability, considering that contractors and even the extent of the supply base can easily change several times during a five year period. Evaluations should be yearly as they are with most forest certification schemes.

The risk assessment procedure is poorly defined and vulnerable to bias

The SBE is carried out by means of a risk assessment, identifying a low or unspecified risk for not meeting each indicator's requirement. If an unspecified risk is identified a Supplier Verification Program needs to be carried out and mitigation measures implemented and monitored to reach the status of low risk. As already outlined above, the SVP or mitigation measures also do not require any verification on the ground, and no requirements for the quality of the mitigation measures are given. This gives little assurance of the effectiveness of these measures. 'standard 2' can be interpreted so that a mere written statement from the biomass producers stating they will do their best to avoid the risk, would likely be enough, without a guarantee of actual changes in the operations. A threshold which would lead to the biomass producer not to be compliant with SBP certification is hard to see.

The standard refers to the risk assessment carried out as part of the FSC Controlled Wood (CW) standard. Whereas the risk assessment approach can in some cases be sensible, it is worth noting that in FSC it is only used for the non-certified material that can be used to mix with certified material up to a certain amount. The SBP builds the credibility of its whole systems on the risk assessment. Experience with FSC has also shown that risk assessments carried out by the companies applying for certification themselves have proven problematic when it comes to more disputed issues. The FSC is there for moving to national risk assessments that builds on the expertise of a range of stakeholder groups. The SBP risk assessment is likely to face the same problems as the FSC CW standard.

The scheme omits the main source of carbon emission from the use of certified pellets

'Standard 5' of the BAF requires the collection of data and monitoring of the energy use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions throughout the supply chain in order to provide information to the energy generators. The requirements of the standard show only very limited knowledge of the full carbon balance of the pellets, since it doesn't require any monitoring of carbon stock changes in the forests, where harvesting has taken place. The changes in these carbon stocks are an order of magnitude more significant than the emissions during the supply chain. The standard also sets only criteria for the GHG emissions, not even for the supply chain. It therefore gives no assurances of positive climate impacts, but only (partly) monitors them.

Indicator of 2.10.2 of the Sustainable Feedstock Standard SFS points towards taking note of the forest carbon stocks as well, stating "carbon accounting demonstrates that harvesting does not diminish the capability of the forest to act as an effective sink or store of carbon over the long term". Unfortunately, this is also a poorly defined criterion which won't enforce the measuring of the GHG balance of the harvesting carried out for the purposes of the biomass producer, specifically. The wording of the indicator does also in fact allow depletion of carbon stock. Additionally and importantly, neither

standard 1 nor 5 make an effort to minimize the 'carbon debt' created when wood is burned directly for energy.

Certification procedure unclear

The documents under consultation also do not provide any explanation as to what the outcome of the SBP certificate is, what are the labels associated, how can they be used by energy utilities and what would the possible labels actually guarantee. The scheme doesn't seem to provide a solid basis and clear guidance for the third-party verification of the pellet mills.

The several exemptions of the BAF concerning materials certified by other schemes and non-primary wood resources, the fact that mixing of non SBP certified materials in the pellets is allowed and that energy generators can also use non-certified materials mixed with certified materials make the scheme hard to understand, potentially confusing and ineffective as a result.

Contact information

BirdLife Europe and European Environmental Bureau: Sini Eräjää, EU Bioenergy Policy Officer, sini.erajaa@birdlife.org, +32 2 541 0797

Bond Beter Leefmilieu Vlaanderen: Sara Van Dyck, Policy Adviser on Energy, sara.van.dyck@bblv.be

Dogwood Alliance: Scot Quaranda, Campaign Director, scot@dogwoodalliance.org

Latvian Ornithological Society, Viesturs Kerus, Chairman, viesturs@lob.le

Natural Resources Defence Council: Debbie Hammel, Senior Resource Specialist, dhammel@nrdc.org

Southern Environmental Law Center, David Carr, General Counsel, dcarr@selcva.org

WWF European Policy Office: Imke Luebbeke, Senior Policy Officer Renewable Energy, iluebbeke@wwf.eu,