

Rt Hon Claire Coutinho MP Secretary of State
Department of Energy Security and Net Zero
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Cc Rt Hon Andrew Bowie MP, Under Secretary of State for Nuclear and Renewables
Cc Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP, Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

28 February 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

As senior representatives of the UK's conservation sector and of international environmental organisations, we are writing in response to the Department's consultation on extending subsidies for large scale bioenergy companies beyond 2027. We urge your Government not to offer additional subsidies for large-scale burning of forest biomass for electricity.

At COP28, the Prime Minister reminded the world of the UK's key role in establishing the Glasgow Declaration on Forests, an agreement that recognises the critical role of nature in net zero. However, three years on, tens of thousands of hectares of forests are being cut down every year to be burned in UK power stations for electricity at a time when the UK is failing to meet its own tree planting targets.

Since the Government first introduced subsidies for bioenergy in 2012, companies have received over £6 billion as part of a perverse incentive to swap burning coal for wood. This is in spite of the fact that claims about burning forest wood being carbon neutral or even a low carbon option are not supported by the available evidence, much of which points to the opposite being the case. Due to tree regrowth taking decades, the carbon instantaneously released from burning trees is not being replaced on a meaningful timescale for the world to reach net zero emissions by the middle of this century. Burning forest biomass in UK power stations only looks zero carbon on paper because it fails to consider the impact of forestry on the carbon stocks and absorption of carbon by forests in other countries, and ignores the time lag between trees being logged and regrowing.

Last year was the hottest year on record. Forests play a critical role in storing carbon and alleviating the impacts of climate change, like flooding. But multiple sources of evidence suggest that bioenergy companies are in fact removing whole trees (not just using waste) from nature-rich forests in the southeast US, Canada, and many European countries to fuel UK bioenergy.

Burning biomass, and producing it in wood pellet facilities in places like the southeast US, also creates air pollution that causes health problems. The American Lung Association and American Heart Association have both come out against wood pellet facilities because of their air quality impacts.

The Department's consultation proposes to keep subsidising bioenergy firms after 2027, by as much as £12 billion by 2035, with no end date on these new contracts. It is assumed these subsidies will end when carbon capture technology becomes available – something that may never materialise at the scale needed. To compound this fiscal folly, new analysis from thinktank Ember shows that a bioenergy carbon capture plant could cost at least £43 billion over its 25 year lifetime.

For these reasons, we urge you not to renew or extend these subsidies, to end the burning of forest biomass in UK power stations, and to redirect investment to nature positive renewables and energy efficiency. The evidence is clear: bioenergy fails on every metric. It fails to secure our energy security, fails to ensure value for money for the public purse, fails to help reach net zero and fails to preserve biodiversity or protect human health.

It is time to consign forest bioenergy to the past and build Britain's secure energy future based on proven technologies that can be delivered in a nature-positive way, such as wind, solar, warm well-insulated homes, battery storage in addition to the restoration of nature. We would welcome an urgent meeting to share our analysis and discuss this important issue with you before the Government makes any decisions or signs any contracts for extended subsidies.

Yours sincerely,

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Katie-Jo Luxton, Executive Director, Global Conservation, RSPB

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Marcus McAuley, Policy Director, Institute of Fisheries Management

Nida Al-Fulaij, CEO, People's Trust for Endangered Species

Florence Garabedian, Director, Friends of the Earth Scotland

Gill Perkins, CEO, Bumblebee Conservation Trust

Dr. J Nunez-Mino, Director of Communication and Fundraising, The Bat Conservation Trust

Daniel Therkelsen, Director, Coal Action Network

Doug Parr, Policy Director, Greenpeace UK

Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife and Countryside Link

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Jemima Hartshorn, Founder and Director, Mums for Lungs

Martin Pigeon, Forest & Climate Campaigner, Fern

Danna Smith, Executive Director, Dogwood Alliance

DJ Gerken, President & Executive Director, Southern Environmental Law Center

Liz McDowell, Senior Campaigns Director, Stand.earth

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