

Sharp criticism of burning 'climate neutral' biomass: 'Continuing is really dramatic'

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RWE's power station in Eemshaven uses both coal and biomass as fuel. © ANP / Kees van de Veen

Sustainable management of forests does not solve the climate problem of biomass combustion. Whether wood pellets carry a certificate or not: when they are burned, it takes decades to perhaps centuries before the CO₂ from the burned trees is absorbed into new forest.

This is what American scientist Tim Searchinger of the prominent Princeton University stated in the House of Representatives on Thursday during a roundtable discussion on biomass. "In the fight against climate change, we cannot afford those extra CO₂ emissions," warns Searchinger. Ergo: stop all biomass combustion.

Sharp criticism



European Commissioner Frans Timmermans recently in Brussels. © BELGA

The American contribution is striking because it sharply criticizes the European Commission and D66 Minister Rob Jetten of Climate. Both Brussels and The Hague see good certification as a goat path to continue using biomass in a sustainable way. The war in Ukraine has further increased this Brussels wish.

European energy security is so important that European Commissioner Frans Timmermans has once again designated biomass as 'climate neutral'. This happened last year in a revised renewable energy directive. Provided a system of certification of used forests is in order. Minister Jetten also states in a letter to the House of Representatives that he wants to follow up on this international certification and that it will also apply to Dutch biomass users.

But biomass is not 'climate neutral', Searchinger emphasises. "Regardless of whether forests are managed sustainably," said the Princeton researcher and technical director for agriculture, forestry and ecosystems at the World Resources Institute (WRI), an international environmental think tank. Domes of European and Dutch scientists have already made such statements.

Two hundred biomassplants

Subsidizing biomass as a CO₂-neutral fuel has led to more than two hundred large and smaller biomass plants in the Netherlands. The largest amount of wood pellets is burned as co-fuel in coal-fired power stations. The Netherlands is one of the largest consumers of biomass and even the largest European importer of wood pellets from the United States.

A growing aversion to burning forests fueled criticism of the Dutch subsidy policy, which is worth billions of euros. Scientists, concerned citizens, but especially organizations such as the Clean Air Committee created political pressure in The Hague. Not only because of the climate effect, but also because the clear felling used affects biodiversity and the burning of wood causes pollution by nitrogen and particulate matter.

"It is high time that Dutch policymakers stop with the charade"

Fenna Swart, chairman of the Clean Air Committee

Minister Jetten partly meets the fuss



Fenna Swart of the Clean Air Committee during a demonstration against biomass with a bag of wood pellets. Once a forest (once a forest) is written on the bag. © Clean Air Committee

Minister Jetten partly met the criticism last year. He announced that he would no longer promise subsidies for new projects. But he did not want to change current awards, which will take many years. The fact that Jetten is now embracing the new European certification plans, Fenna Swart, chairman of the Clean Air Committee (CSL), finds it 'amazing'. "Certification is nothing more than greenwashing biomass combustion," says Swart.

For example, the biomass fighter is not pleased with the import of wood pellets from the southeastern United States. The pellets are made from the 'clear felling of hardwood forests with a high biodiversity', says Swart. "Without regard for local communities, wildlife or the climate. It is high time that Dutch policymakers stop the charade of pretending that these practices in some way comply with Dutch sustainability standards."

Together with international environmental organizations, CSL sent an urgent letter to the House of Representatives. According to them, the debate in the House should not be about stricter certification, and what is still possible, but about ending all outstanding biomass subsidies. Swart: „New biomass subsidies have already stopped, now the existing subsidies. Burning wood produces 16 percent more CO₂ than coal and 94 percent more than gas. Dutch politicians should be an example for the rest of the world.”

Dramatic



Energy professor David Smeulders of Eindhoven University of Technology. "For example, opt for more nuclear energy." © Koen Verheijden

Energy professor David Smeulders of Eindhoven University of Technology is also not in favor of the Brussels line of continuing to subsidize biomass. He does not believe in watertight certification. "The big problem is that third parties have to do this. And by whom are they paid? By the industry." That is asking for trouble, Smeulders fears.

Incidentally, the professor understands that the loss of Russian gas is leading to a search for alternative energy sources. Smeulders: "Then opt for more nuclear energy, for example. Continuing to burn trees is really dramatic. You don't have to be a scientist for that: with a little common sense you understand that we desperately need every tree to store CO₂."

However, the letter from Minister Jetten shows that he wants to keep the door open for biomass. Since the latter term has acquired such a negative connotation, the ministry has used the term biobased raw materials. "The cabinet is convinced that sustainable biobased raw materials have an important role to play in the transition to a climate-neutral and circular economy in 2050," says Jetten.

Advisory Committee

The minister wants a new advisory committee to ensure that shiploads full of shredded forests meet new sustainability criteria. According to him, it is still possible to produce biomass sustainably, without "exhausting the soil, polluting groundwater and surface water, affecting biodiversity and air pollution". After Thursday's hearing, the House of Representatives will have to take a position on whether it supports the minister in this.

According to Princeton researcher Searchinger, this is unwise. By continuing to stimulate biomass, Europe will saddle other continents with an even bigger climate problem, he argues. "The only thing bioenergy subsidies do is use people's money in the Netherlands to increase CO₂ emissions, so that other countries have to spend even more money on climate policy to reduce emissions."