

# Biomass has not been smoked out for a long time

Round table discussion about subsidies for wood pellets

by Kleis Jager, Telegraaf 14 June 2023

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The Eemshaven power station, in which biomass is also used as fuel in addition to coal. The discussion about this is far from over.

**Climate Minister Jetten would not spend a penny on burning 'woody biomass'. However, the end of this fiercely controversial practice is still far from in sight. On Thursday, specialists in the House of Representatives will discuss how to proceed.**

In the debate on climate change, it seemed to be a foregone conclusion: biomass, friend and foe alike, really don't know. Stacks of trees that have been cut down far away to be burned in Dutch power stations, how nonsensical is that?

Woody biomass became the symbol of a policy that, with its fixation on climate goals, seems to forget that it all started with the preservation of the planet's resources.

There was increasing criticism of the principle that the CO<sub>2</sub> released during the combustion of biomass is not included in national emissions. The argument for this is that this CO<sub>2</sub> is absorbed by the planting of new trees and crops.

But this does not take into account that that absorption takes 30 to 50 years. Something that burns in minutes cannot be compared to what takes decades to grow.

In addition, the pellets – granules of pressed wood – originally came from the Baltic States and now mainly from the American state of North Carolina. It is shipped in so-called bulk carriers. But those emissions do not count in the statistics either.

The outrage was mainly fueled by Fenna Swart of the Clean Air Committee, one of the speakers on Thursday during a round table discussion in the House of Representatives. Partly due to the pressure she exerted, Rob Jetten decided to end subsidies last year.

That seemed to seal the fate of the pellets. But in 2022, biomass still made up almost half of all renewable energy in the Netherlands. Last year, the share of renewable energy in total national energy consumption was 15 percent: 7 percent came from sun and wind and 6 percent came from biomass, but slightly less than in previous years.

Biomass is not only woody, it can also be agricultural residual waste, for example. But the main part consists of the hated wood pellets. Fenna Swart calls it impossible. "Jetten's intervention only concerned new projects, not the old ones. The train just keeps going."

Swart will therefore ask in her contribution to permanently stop the long-term subsidies. If that leads to claims for damages, so be it. "A livable planet is more important than an angry energy company."

Yet there is another side to a story that seems so obvious at first glance. Because what if the pellets are made from residual wood from well-managed production forests, where our Ikea cabinets come from, among other things.

Henri Bontenbal, energy spokesperson for the CDA, is one of the few who does believe in this. The policy that entire forests are disappearing in Dutch power stations is not correct, he says. "That idea has been forced upon us by the environmental movement, which often deceives the truth. We are talking about a free by-product here, it is efficient to use that. Those forests, which are not interesting in terms of diversity, by the way, are not getting any smaller."

Bontenbal even sees a major role for biomass now that green policy threatens power shortages in the future. "Wind and sun are unreliable. If we want to be sure of power, we need adjustable power at hand. A controllable coal-fired power station – there are four of them – can be converted into a biomass power station equipped with so-called BECCS technology. This makes it possible to extract CO2 from the atmosphere and store it underground.

Bontenbal's plea smacks a bit of technosalvation, the belief that we can solve all our problems with technology and infrastructure. In any case, it does not make any impression on Fenna Swart: "This is expensive nonsense at the expense of the taxpayer." She will focus her arrows in the Chamber on the "failing control" of the origin of the wood pellets. "Everything eventually ends up in one huge pile, those pellets are not in bags with stickers on them. And the energy companies that order it refuse to tell you where it comes from."