

Climate crisis cannot be understood without knowledge of ecological crisis

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[Fenna Swart](#) Chair Clean Air Committee



By: Fenna Swart and Maarten Visschers

Last week, one of nature's most sweeping laws escaped destruction in a draw. The opposition came from traditional lobbies for intensive agriculture, forestry and fisheries with the Netherlands in the lead. A similar impasse in the agricultural agreement is also dragging on in The Hague. Scientists have been saying it for two decades now: we are not facing a "climate crisis," we are facing an ecological crisis of which climate change and ecosystem collapse are the main manifestations. You cannot solve, or even understand, one without the other.

Not only reduce but also protect

Not only measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are important (so-called climate mitigation), but also measures that protect us from the consequences of the changing climate (climate adaptation). Based on current EU policies, it is likely that temperatures will continue to rise and that droughts, floods and fires will become more frequent and widespread. Obviously, biodiverse forests are more resilient to such disturbances than tree plantations and planted monocultures.

Undermining key climate target

The drastic decline in carbon storage in European forests is largely due to the significant increase in logging over the past decade. About half of the felled wood in the EU is burned for energy. On this basis, we can conclude that Europe's energy dependence on biomass undermines the main climate goal of reducing emissions.

Responsible committees

The two Brussels departments, Climate and Energy, are largely responsible for this decline because until recently both have promoted the cutting and burning of forests for renewable energy. They have also opposed the introduction of science-based limits on the use of wood burning for energy. The European Commission's (EC) own impact assessment in 2016, and a variety of reports from the Joint Research Center (JRC, the EC's science office), have made clear that burning wood, increases net CO₂ emissions compared to fossil fuels over timeframes relevant to climate policy.

Underground storage techniques not sustainable

Against this background and the fact that the recommendations of its own scientists (from the JRC) have been ignored, it is likely that the proposed consultation will fail to acknowledge that EU forest and land carbon storage is collapsing. At the same time, independent research shows that subsidized programs for technological carbon removal in the form of so-called BECCS (biomass combustion with CO₂ capture and underground storage) are [unproven, expensive and actually energy-guzzling](#). BECCS is a technique that is increasingly referred to by energy companies such as RWE, among others, as a justification for converting coal-fired power plants to biomass, as evidenced once again last week by the speech of top executive Miesen of energy company RWE, [during the Biomass Roundtable discussion in the Lower House](#) ("we're shoving emissions under the sea").

Starting points climate target 2040

The 2040 climate target should therefore be based on realistic practical reports rather than utopian mathematical models. In addition, it is important that the assessment transparently acknowledges the net carbon impact of forest biomass. Achieving climate stability requires - in addition to a very drastic reduction in our carbon emissions - a significantly greater

amount of carbon storage in forests. Within current regulations, this is impossible unless the harvesting of forest biomass is restricted.

Climate and nature; inextricably linked

Brussels is holding this month until June 24, an open public consultation on setting the new climate target for 2040 and the measures needed for this in the period 2030-2040. An important part of the European climate strategy is to protect, restore and enhance Europe's remaining, natural and protected forests for carbon storage. Crucial here is the recognition that the future viability of Europe (and Earth) depends in large part on Europe's ability to reverse the current decline of our remaining forests. The question is whether we can manage with forest restoration alone. Even if we manage to reduce current emissions from all sectors (industry, mobility, built environment), we are still not there according to science. Forest restoration is then a minimum requirement.

Dr. Fenna Swart, chair of the [Clean Air Committee](#)

Drs. Maarten Visschers, board member [Leefmilieu](#)

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