



'What's wrong with burning wood for electricity?' MP Briefing - July 2024

- Drax, the UK's single largest carbon emitter and the biggest wood-burning company in the world, burned almost [6 million tonnes of wood](#) at its UK power plant in Yorkshire in 2023.
- Drax continues to be embroiled in controversy, including an ongoing investigation by the energy regulator Ofgem over the sustainability of its wood sourcing. A recent BBC Panorama investigation into Drax's continued burning of wood from primary forests in Canada, and research conducted by Conservation North, Bulkley Valley Stewardship Coalition and Biofuelwatch, show that Drax has [breached environmental laws 189 times](#) at its Canadian pellet mills.
- Drax currently receives around £1.9 million per day in renewable energy subsidies from UK energy bills to burn wood. These subsidies are due to end in 2027.
- The previous UK Government recently [consulted](#) on extending bioenergy subsidies after 2027, potentially costing the public over £4 billion (if extended for only 3 years) or £12 billion if extended to 2035.
- According to the consultation, wood-burning companies like Drax would not be obliged to capture and store carbon emissions in order to receive the new subsidies.
- If granted, the new subsidies could lock the UK into long-term funding for wood-burning power stations and leave little left in the green energy budget for the new Government to fund genuine renewables like wind and solar power.
- Biofuelwatch and Stop Burning Trees are calling for an end to subsidies for burning wood & for MPs to say no to new subsidies for wood-burning in power stations like Drax.

Why MPs should oppose new subsidies for wood-burning power stations

Burning biomass is not carbon neutral

Burning wood in power stations like Drax in Yorkshire, and Lynemouth in Northumberland, releases significant carbon dioxide that is not offset for decades until trees eventually regrow, if they ever do. Therefore, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) [have found that](#) "sustained use of large-scale biomass generation is not compatible with the path to Net Zero" and that "there should be no role for large-scale unabated biomass generation beyond expiry of existing subsidy support in 2027."

Counting biomass as zero carbon in the UK energy sector wrongly assumes that it does not impact the climate. [Drax is the UK's single largest carbon emitter](#) and emitted over 11 million tonnes of carbon dioxide from burning wood in 2023. The [European Academies Scientific Advisory Council](#) and [over 500 scientists](#) have said that negative impacts on the climate of burning wood may persist for decades to centuries.

Bioenergy is harming communities

In the U.S. Southeast, where the majority of the UK's wood pellets are produced, communities are [being harmed](#) by the [significant air pollution emitted by these plants](#). Wood pellet mills release PM2.5 air pollution (fine dust), nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds which, [according to the American Lung Association, are associated with a wide range of health issues](#).



On multiple occasions, companies producing wood pellets have been fined for breaching legal air pollution limits, especially in the U.S. Southeast where wood pellet mills are 50% [more likely to be sited in “environmental justice” communities](#) (i.e. predominantly non-white communities that live below the poverty line). In 2022, Drax was accused of driving ‘environmental racism’ after settling air pollution violations at its pellet mills in Louisiana. Burning wood in UK power stations also releases harmful PM 2.5 particulates. According to new research by US scientists, there is [no safe level of these particulates for human health](#).

Bioenergy is one of the most expensive forms of energy

Relying on bioenergy will undermine the UK's energy security because it depends on imports of wood, which are likely to rise in price, and requires huge areas of land. In 2023, Drax alone received £686.7 million in renewable energy subsidies to burn wood. These subsidies are funded through an additional charge on UK energy bills and due to continue until 2027.

The previous UK Government recently [consulted](#) on extending bioenergy subsidies after 2027, potentially costing the public over £4 billion (if extended for only 3 years) or £12 billion if extended to 2035. According to the consultation, the previous Government considered extending biomass subsidies to give the industry more time to develop carbon capture technology, even though Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) is unproven at scale. The consultation did not include a requirement for wood-burning companies to capture or store CO₂ to receive new funding.

If granted, the new subsidies would lock the new Government into huge funding for biomass which would leave very little left in the green energy budget to invest in genuine climate solutions, such as wind and solar power or home insulation, which could create new green jobs and help to tackle both the climate emergency and the cost of living crisis.

Bioenergy degrades forests and harms nature

The UK biomass industry's sourcing of wood from forests causes harm to nature and wildlife. The majority of the wood pellets Drax burns are sourced from the wildlife-rich North American Coastal Plain in the Southeastern USA. [The area has been designated as a Global Biodiversity Hotspot and contains at least thirty protected and/or imperilled bird species](#). Logging for wood pellets in these forests puts at risk habitat for birds and other species that are endangered and protected.

In Canada biomass is sourced from the Boreal forest, degrading important habitat for imperilled species such as the caribou. [February 2024 investigations](#) by NGOs and the BBC show that Drax continues to use trees from Primary and Old Growth forests – some of which are over 250 years old – to make wood pellets in Canada.

In Europe, the UK's biomass comes from countries such as Estonia. There, 5,700 hectares of forests that are of “Woodland Key Habitat” quality, but aren't formally protected, have been logged, including for wood pellets. Logging licences have also been issued for over 82,000 hectares of forests within Natura 2000 areas intended to protect rare and imperilled species.

- **Please contact the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Ed Miliband, to urge him to say no to new subsidies for burning wood in power stations.**
- **Please contact biofuelwatch@gmail.com if you would like any more information.**