**Headline:** Europe Is Perversely Causing the Destruction of U.S. Forests in the Name of Fighting Climate Change

**Teaser:** Several EU nations have embraced biomass electricity, which speeds up carbon emissions, pollution and forest destruction.

By Danna Smith

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**Images:** <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/15dRavGKiJs43X1mePLGRlG2BP1OwuPTE?usp=sharing>

**[Article Body:]**

Europe is often considered to be a global leader on climate action. For over a decade, the European Union (EU) has been actively promoting the need for action on climate change, pushing policies that scale back carbon emissions and support the growth of renewable energy.

On the bright side, this has led to the retirement of a large number of coal-burning power plants and increased adoption of solar and wind power. However, a number of countries have embraced biomass electricity, a short-term fix that is at best a false solution, and at worst is speeding up carbon emissions, pollution and forest destruction. In fact, though many may believe that solar and wind power are the main sources of the EU’s renewable energy, it is actually biomass, which represents nearly [60 percent](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC109354/biomass_4_energy_brief_online_1.pdf) of the total.

Biomass electricity is generated by burning organic matter. Forests have rapidly become a primary source of [biomass fuel in the EU](https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=20912). Flawed carbon accounting assumes burning trees is carbon-neutral if a tree is planted to replace the one that has been chopped down, [but biomass imported from the U.S. to the EU is never properly accounted for](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780124095489119700). This faulty logic has led to [massive renewable energy subsidies](https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/axedrax-campaign/#C3) for biomass under the EU Renewable Energy Directive program. It has further encouraged countries like [the UK, Netherlands and Denmark](https://www.climatecentral.org/news/new-eu-wood-energy-rules-threaten-climate-forests-20988) to subsidize the destruction of forests for fuel at a time when we need to let forests grow to absorb carbon from the atmosphere, protect biodiversity and shore up natural protections against extreme flooding and droughts. For example, thanks to an [average £2.1 million in subsidies every day](https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/axedrax-campaign/#C3), Drax, the largest carbon emitter in the UK, is now also the world’s largest burner of wood for power.

To add insult to injury, in the absence of sufficient supplies of wood from its own forests, the EU is heavily reliant on importing wood pellets from forests far away. In fact, biodiverse and carbon-rich forests across the United States’ Southern Coastal Plain—a region that encompasses coastal North and South Carolina, southern Georgia and Alabama, and northern Florida—have become the primary global target for supplying biomass fuel to the EU. The Southern U.S. is now [the world’s largest producer and exporter of wood pellets](https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/slow-burn-part-3-worlds-largest-wood-pellet-maker-both-welcomed-and-condemned-nc#:~:text=Based%20in%20Maryland%2C%20Enviva%20has,a%20year%2C%20all%20for%20export.). Under the guise of “renewable energy,” the voracious European demand for wood pellets has put forests and communities in this region at increased risk.

[Nearly 800 scientists warned](https://tinyurl.com/yywpsjpn) members of the European Parliament that burning trees releases more carbon than coal or gas per unit of energy generated ([making climate change worse](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-02-23-impacts-demand-woody-biomass-climate-forests-brack-final.pdf)), and they also pointed out that [logging](https://news.mongabay.com/2017/03/aggressive-forest-protection-needed-to-meet-us-climate-goals/) degrades critical ecological services that standing forests provide, such as natural flood control. Standing forests act like sponges, slowing the rate of water flow into streams and rivers, helping to prevent flooding. When a forest is cleared, the volume of water and soil erosion entering streams and rivers is accelerated during periods of heavy rain, causing rivers and streams to overflow. Tropical storms and hurricanes are common in the U.S. Southeast and are becoming more intense in the era of climate change.

In recent years, the communities of the Southern Coastal Plain have experienced some of the [most devastating and costly](https://www.climate.gov/news-features/blogs/beyond-data/2010-2019-landmark-decade-us-billion-dollar-weather-and-climate) flooding events in the world, with disproportionate impacts to low-income, rural communities of color. Protecting wetland forests, which provide natural flood protections, has become a [regional priority among conservation groups](https://wetlandforests.org/) and communities across the region.

Despite the industry’s best attempts to greenwash wood pellets as a “sustainable, renewable” fuel, numerous investigations by the [media and environmental organizations](https://earthmaven.io/planetwatch/featured/forests-reduced-to-wood-pellets--0dqGAfmf0yV3GLr3MdBnw) have provided [hard evidence](https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Biomass-Investigation-Booklet-2019.pdf) of the industry’s toxic air pollution and destruction of biodiverse forests. Once clear-cut, these forests can take up to a century to fully regenerate and recapture the carbon that was emitted from the logging and burning of biomass. The science is clear that we don’t have the luxury of waiting a century to draw down carbon—we must do it now. Additionally, the process of turning trees into wood pellets releases toxic pollution into the air, further compromising the health of [nearby communities](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jun/30/wood-pellets-biomass-environmental-impact), which are already overburdened by other sources of industrial pollution. For example, in one small community in eastern North Carolina, there are other polluting industries besides the Enviva wood pellet plant: a natural gas pipeline, a chicken processing facility and a natural gas-fired power plant, [all dumping pollution on a community that is predominantly low-income and Black](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/env.2017.0025).

Thankfully, despite the biomass and wood pellet industries spending millions of dollars to lobby and promote this false solution to climate change, more elected officials, environmental organizations and frontline communities are starting to see the light, and the days of burning our forests for electricity may be numbered.

**Impacted Communities Fight Back**

For years now, the EU’s burning of forests for electricity has flown under the radar, and the EU is often praised for its move away from coal.

Thankfully, more and more organizations working to end the use of fossil fuels have started to see how important our forests are for protecting us from the worst impacts of climate change and how destroying them to make electricity is not the right path forward. For example, leaders in the anti-coal movement, including [Mary Anne Hitt](https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/energy-environment/456977-chopping-down-and-burning-our-forests-for-electricity), the director of the [Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign](https://www.sierraclub.org/tennessee/harvey-broome/sierra-club-beyond-coal-campaign), and [350.org](https://350.org/) founder [Bill McKibben](https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/dont-burn-trees-to-fight-climate-changelet-them-grow), have recently publicly denounced biomass as a false solution that must be stopped, reinforcing the need to protect forests while staying focused on renewable energy like solar and wind.

In addition to the growing biomass opposition from high-profile organizations leading the charge to phase out fossil fuels, the frontline communities that are facing new wood pellet production facilities in the United States—and communities facing the conversion of dirty coal plants to dirty biomass plants or brand new biomass power plants in Europe—are fighting back. Those who suffer the most from this pollution and destruction are rising up.

In [North Carolina, for example](https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article232692457.html), Enviva, the world’s largest wood pellet manufacturer, applied to expand production at [three of its facilities](https://www.bioenergy-news.com/news/enviva-eyes-expansion-following-nc-air-quality-permit-approval/). In each of those communities, local leaders and affected residents showed up at public hearings, demanding the state take action to stop Enviva’s expansion. Even in rural [Mississippi](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/columnists/2019/05/09/mississippi-deserves-better-than-envivas-wood-pellet-mill/1153760001/) and [Alabama](https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/2019/10/alabama-groups-oppose-envivas-epes-facility/), where local citizens had little warning of proposed new facilities, Enviva was met with opposition.

“We believe that everyone should have a clean, safe place to live, work, and play,” said [Belinda Joyner,](https://www.dogwoodalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Community-Voices-Fact-Sheet.pdf) a Northeastern organizer for Clean Water for North Carolina. “Enviva has come in and detracted the living conditions of the community. This is what the community has to live with and it’s an injustice to them.”

And in Europe, despite the fact that many of the big environmental groups have ignored biomass for fear it would impact their fight against coal, local communities in [Ireland](https://www.endswasteandbioenergy.com/article/1524548/ireland-ngos-criticise-biomass-conversion-plans), [the Netherlands](https://www.duurzaamdorpdiemen.nl/) and [France](https://www.eubioenergy.com/2015/11/18/gardanne-france/) have come out strong in their opposition to burning wood for electricity in their backyards—and have even stopped new facilities from being constructed. Collectively, residents in the U.S. and EU are tired of empty rhetoric on climate change and are calling out biomass as a false solution while taking a stand for forests.

As the scientific evidence and public opposition mounts, elected officials on both sides of the pond are starting to express concern and take action. In March, the [Virginia](https://www.nrdc.org/experts/sami-yassa/virginia-and-north-carolina-show-biomass-exits) legislature passed the Clean Economy Act, which explicitly excludes biomass from the renewable energy list. In [North Carolina](https://energynews.us/2019/02/08/southeast/n-c-gov-roy-cooper-expresses-concern-over-wood-pellet-emissions/), Gov. Roy Cooper expressed concern about biomass at a congressional hearing in Washington, D.C. The state’s newly developed [Clean Energy Plan](https://deq.nc.gov/energy-climate/climate-change/nc-climate-change-interagency-council/climate-change-clean-energy-16) stated that biomass would not be a part of the state’s clean energy future, noting that the EU policy treating biomass as carbon neutral “should be challenged at the national and international level.” In [Georgia](https://tinyurl.com/yadbkxz8), there is currently a bipartisan forest resolution before the state House and Senate that criticizes biomass as a climate solution and calls for greater protection for forests.

Additionally, more European leaders at the EU and national levels are expressing concern about biomass. Vice President of the EU [Frans Timmermans](https://news.mongabay.com/2019/12/cop25-eu-officials-say-biomass-burning-policy-to-come-under-critical-review/), who is in charge of the European Green Deal, has noted that the “issue of biofuels needs to be looked at very carefully” to ascertain whether it “does not do more harm than that it does good.”

Most importantly, in May, the EU announced that it will assess its biomass strategy as part of its [biodiversity action plan](https://www.euractiv.com/section/biomass/news/eu-plans-sweeping-bioenergy-review-by-end-2020/1468066/). This could lead to a revision of current biomass policy 10 years ahead of schedule, with the aim of eliminating controversial sources like wood from the mix. Ideally, this would also incorporate more accurate [accounting for carbon emissions from burning wood](https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/scientists-warn-congress-against-declaring-biomass-burning-carbon-neutral/) to generate electricity. Currently, carbon emissions from wood are about [three times higher](https://energynews.us/2013/05/10/midwest/does-burning-wood-instead-of-fossil-fuels-increase-ghg-emissions/) than “emissions from a similar-sized natural gas electric power plant,” according to one 2010 study.

[Belgium](https://www.eubioenergy.com/2017/11/02/project-for-a-large-scale-biomass-plant-in-belgium-cancelled/) and [Ireland](https://greennews.ie/esb-abp-peat-biomass/) have both denied recent applications for new biomass facilities. In the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark—three of the largest biomass electricity-producing countries—there is growing opposition from all levels of government, which is vital because economically, the subsidies from these countries are all that keeps this industry going. A recent [national opinion poll in the Netherlands](https://www.telegraaf.nl/watuzegt/1974050291/uitslag-stelling-houtstook-niet-de-oplossing) found that 98 percent of the country’s citizens “agree that biomass subsidies should be stopped.”

As can be expected from any dirty industry that is one policy change away from toppling like a house of cards, biomass advocates are in attack mode on the organizations, elected officials and even the media that are exposing the truth about this deceptive and destructive energy source. Starting [astroturfed not-for-profit groups](https://tinyurl.com/yaacp8tz), running expensive greenwashing ad campaigns and attacking the credibility of its critics are just a few of the dirty tricks that the industry has employed in recent months. They have even [attacked the credibility of investigative reporters](https://futureforestsandjobs.com/meet-the-activists-masquerading-as-reporters-attacking-bioenergy/) who have written balanced stories on their industry.

It seems the growing movement to stop the destruction and burning of forests for electricity may be winning, but it’s not out of the woods yet. The light at the end of the dark biomass tunnel is a 21st-century energy economy powered by clean, renewable energy and a forest economy that is restorative rather than destructive. There needs to be political will to double down on new climate policies that focus on the right priorities like protecting and restoring our forests, not just planting trees. We need climate policies that stay focused on investing in renewable energy like solar and wind rather than false solutions like biomass and natural gas. And as we transition to a regenerative economy, it must be powered by the people, building opportunity for those who have suffered the most at the hands of the industries that have reaped tremendous profits while creating the climate crisis we find ourselves in today.

Collectively defeating the insidious side of EU renewable energy is essential to avoid utter climate chaos. The sooner governments around the world can unite to move away from all dirty fuels—including coal, fracked gas and biomass—and lean toward actually protecting nature, the better.