

The Truth about “Dirtier than Coal”

Overview

This paper explains how the claim that biomass is “Dirtier than Coal” is completely false and misrepresents the scientific data that made up DECC’s Bioenergy Strategy.

By way of background, as you may know Nigel Mortimer was commissioned by DECC to co-author [research](#) into the sustainability of biomass. His research fed into the [UK 2012 Bioenergy Strategy](#). Prof Tim Searchinger then wrote a [report](#) which repurposed Dr Mortimer’s research by using a small, isolated group of biomass harvesting scenarios that are bad in terms of carbon emissions and had already been identified by Mortimer and shown to be an outlier practice. Searchinger’s ‘report’ has scandalously been used as the basis of the [‘Dirtier Than Coal?’ report](#) by Friends of the Earth, RSPB, Greenpeace.

Please find below extracts from key sources including Forestry Commission, the Renewable Energy Association, Forest2Market and DECC itself which emphasise how Searchinger’s ‘report’ is bad science, a misuse of the facts on biomass and whose misrepresentation is actually damaging the fight against climate change.

The Forestry Commission

“The research undertaken by FR and NEA for DECC and related research by FR clearly demonstrates that the production of mixtures of sawn wood, wood-based panels, paper and fuel (including a proportion from small, young thinnings as whole trees) results in significant overall greenhouse gas benefits”

“Whilst claiming special insight, the [Searchinger] paper chooses just one scenario from the peer reviewed study by FR and NEA for DECC, amongst the hundreds examined, but that is explicitly rejected by the DECC study. Although this particular scenario clearly does not represent UK practice, the Searchinger Paper and the DtC report use it to allege that biomass is “dirtier than coal”, ignoring all the other scenarios that show carbon saving benefits in the form of lower GHG emissions ranging from marginal to very substantial.”

“Biomass Energy Centre comments on Dirtier than Coal report”: <http://bit.ly/VxG1nJ>

The Biomass Energy Centre is a technical information centre based within Forest Research, the research agency of the Forestry Commission.

REA Back Biomass Campaign

“The ‘whole trees’ claim about biomass being worse than coal misinterprets the original study by North Energy Associates and Forest Research. It assumes the practice that leads to net carbon emissions is the practice of using the whole of a tree for biomass. This does not reflect normal forestry practice because it is economically unsustainable. Therefore the ‘all wood from all trees’ model is discredited as a basis on which to assess biomass.”

Back Biomass Sustainability Fact Sheet: <http://bit.ly/VAiCb3>

Renewable Energy Association

“Your organisations are currently promoting a good deal of misinformation as ‘science’ and – in some instances it appears deliberately – facilitating confusion between the facts and terms of reference in this debate. You have the expertise and experience to know that the “Dirtier than Coal” report is not science; to understand fully the differences between the various industries under discussion”

Letter from REA Chief Executive to Friends of the Earth, RSPB and Greenpeace, 18 March 2013:

<http://bit.ly/YiTiVX>

Forest2Market

“The math the NGOs favor looks at a macro-level issue at a micro tree-by-tree level. It also starts the carbon clock when the tree is harvested, thereby failing to account for the carbon the tree sequestered up to that point.”

“Increased demand for wood, whether for biomass or any other wood product, provides landowners with the financial incentive they need to replant and maintain their forest land. Without these markets in place, economic opportunities must be sought elsewhere and oftentimes results in the removal of forests through development or conversion to marginally fertile crop land.”

“The NGOs’ argument assumes the existing wood supply is not available to meet rising demand, when in fact, the US South contains 199.5 million acres of private forest land ready to meet demand from all sources.”

“Smoke and Mirrors: Wood Biomass and the Environment”, LeAndra Spicer, 13 May 2013:

<http://www.forest2market.com/blog/smoke-and-mirrors-wood-biomass-and-the-environment>

Forest2Market is an industry research firm that covers the forest products industry (e.g. markets, transactions, pricing, growth to drain). They are also a member of the US Industrial Pellet Association.

Department for Energy and Climate Change

“The results of the Forest Research and North Energy Associates analysis show that the use of wood from managed UK forests for bioenergy (in place of fossil fuels) usually has greater GHG benefits than leaving the trees unharvested in the forest, provided that it is produced as a coproduct of wood utilised for materials (in place of alternative materials e.g. concrete).”

“UK Bioenergy Strategy supplementary note: Carbon impacts of forest biomass”, November 2012:

<http://bit.ly/12GQMZa>

Stewart Boyle, South East Wood Fuels and former Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace campaigner

“The so-called ‘debate’ is not really a scientific debate and has become distorted due to some big biases among NGOs and others. I spent a decade working for NGOs such as GP and FOE

so am quite sympathetic to these groups. I just think that right now they have lost the plot on energy. The fact that some parts of Greenpeace are saying publically that Gas power is better than bioenergy and FOE's Mike Child's seems ready to support nuclear power, tells me they are losing their way (and potential moral force)."

"The whole debate has got completely distorted for what I believe are misguided reasons and based on bad science. The 'Dirtier than Coal?' report by the NGOs was a travesty. It was based on work by Searchinger who took the most extreme scenario, among hundreds of scenarios produced by Forest Research and North Energy Associates to show that burning trees in a power plant was 'bad'."

"To dismiss bioenergy by taking extreme 'straw men' scenarios, which is what the NGOs have done, threatens to lose a decade on serious short-term progress on climate change. We are potentially destroying some very important carbon reduction runs by NGOs chasing headlines."

Taken from Guardian online debate *"Biomass: should we burn trees to generate electricity?"*, 9 May 2013: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2013/may/09/biomass-burn-trees-generate-electricity>